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Action at Boundary Peak

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by

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AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 22

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An Airmont Book published by arrangement with
Thomas Bouregy and Company, Inc.

Printing History

Bouregy edition published November, 1955
Airmont edition published October, 1963

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PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA
BY THE RYERSON PRESS, TORONTO

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE COLONIAL PRESS INC., CLINTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Action at Boundary Peak

ONE

CAPTAIN NATHANIEL DUNN, United States Cavalry, stopped his steep climb with one hand gripping the itchy trunk of a young fir, the other digging into a handhold on a sharp projection of rock. Glancing down, he could see his horse and pack mule grazing in the tiny cul-de-sac meadow where he had hobbled them. By twisting his head at just the right angle, he could squint upward along the steep face of the cliff to the ridge still a good fifty feet away.

What he would find when he got to the top of that ridge, he had no way of knowing. His area map showed all this country in only the most general way. As far as he knew, no white man since the boundary survey crew of the fifties had ever been this far off the Wildhorse Trail. The mountains stretched northward and westward, fold on fold.

It made him wonder why Will Burke and his sister had gone into these mountains. Unless, he thought, Burke had located the old boundary survey trail that was reputed to go through them to the Canadian Border only a short distance north. Or—and this seemed more plausible—unless Burke was fleeing without reason, driven by blind panic.

It might have been just a trick of his imagination when he had looked up. He might not have seen Leslie Burke's face looking down on him from the ridge. Still, the tracks of herself and her brother had led into this box canyon and had not gone out. There was no other place for them to be except up above.

It made Dunn angry. For a man who could outtrack most of the Indians he had known, he felt singularly helpless here. Somehow the Burkes had got out of the meadow, their horses with them, and had left no sign for him to follow.

Swearing, he sought a fresh toehold for his left foot,

balanced himself and thrust, reaching upward for another grip. A foot at a time, that was the way in which he had made every inch of this ascent from the meadow floor below. A toehold—thrust—grab—repeat.

A small rock clanked from above and he lifted his head in time to see it bounding down toward him. He flattened himself against the rock face, his mouth and nose buried in the rubble. The rock became noisier and then with a soft hiss went over his head and beyond his hearing.

He lifted his head and looked upward. He was sweating. If one rock had come loose up above, others could too. It only took one, falling just right, to start a slide that could sweep him from the cliff to the meadow below.

He could see nothing moving; there was only the cliff face breaking off at the ridge and, beyond it, the sweep of the blue sky in the afternoon sunlight. He let out a breath and prepared to make his next move upward.

A remembered voice said, "How many warnings do you need, Captain?"

Dunn let his foot ease back to its former resting place and looked upward again. By shifting his weight to his right foot he could turn so that he was able to see her. She was not thirty feet away, her head and shoulders visible through a notch at the crest of the ridge. She still wore the high-necked dress—gray with green buttons—that he had admired back at Fort Kootenai. Her face was streaked with dirt and roughened from wind and sun. Her hair was loose about her face—a great dark mass of hair that caught the sunlight and threw the glint of a rainbow of colors back into his eyes.

He could see the army carbine that she held so competently.

"Go back, Captain. I'd hate to shoot you."

"Don't be foolish, Miss Burke. You can't run forever." His voice was as level and impersonal as her own—both spoke as though the hour they had shared five nights before had never happened. "If you come back now, it will go easier with you," he said. "If you have to be brought back . . ."

Her voice was bitter. "Easy or otherwise, Captain, a jail and a hangman's rope are the same."

"I offer you a last chance to come of your own free will."

"I offer you a last chance," she mocked him, "to go back —alive."

Dunn looked at her and saw no yielding. He lowered his head and his hand reached up. He pulled, drawing himself a foot nearer the top.

He did not hear the echo of the shot. The last thing he remembered was the feel of the bullet striking him.

TWO

DUNN received his orders at Walla Walla to proceed to Fort Kootenai, a post the army had recently established where the Wildhorse Trail crossed the Kootenai River. Dunn's superior, Colonel Sanders, was even more specific than usual about his assignment.

"There's some kind of trouble brewing up there, Nat. The report from Cartwright says that lately supply loads and the payroll aren't getting through. And some of the miners coming down from Wildhorse Creek have been robbed just after they cross the Border."

"It's Major Cartwright's job to get those things through," Dunn said. "He has the men, hasn't he?"

Sanders said in his slow, dry way, "Not men enough, apparently. That's where you come in. It's your kind of job."

Dunn drew slowly on one of his superior's cheroots. "I joined the cavalry—I thought," he said with sour humor. "I've spent the last five years in this kind of work."

"You're too good at it," Sanders said. "Maybe if you'd sluff off once in a while, you wouldn't get these assignments."

Dunn's grin threw the lean planes of his long face into sharp relief. The cavalry was his life; he had known nothing else for ten years; he wanted to know nothing else.

Sanders pushed his cigar box forward. "Take another one and get going, Nat." He rose, holding out his hand. "And watch yourself. It's empty country. Your maps won't be worth much; there won't be anyone up there to help you." He saw Dunn's surprise and added, "Cartwright will give you the information he has. It isn't much."

Dunn was at the office door when Sanders spoke again. "And do it your way, Nat. It's been a good way up to now."

"My way," Dunn agreed. He walked out.

He took the well-traveled road to Spokane Falls and

then the lesser-used Wildhorse Trail which went northeast from there. The country closed in on him rapidly north of the Falls. He was riding through a country as flat as a prairie but solid with fir and cedar and larch and birch. He had ridden a lot of country for the army but never had he seen anything as wild as this. His map told him that the Cabinet Mountains were on one hand and the almost legendary Selkirks on the other, but it told him little else. This trail had seen many travelers in the seventy years since the fur trader, David Thompson, had come down it back in 1808, but most of them had been Indian. And even now, Dunn noticed, there were few signs of wagon tracks or heavy pack trains—of anything but the tread of men's feet and the light step of saddle horses. When he stopped on the ridge above the Kootenai River and looked down into the valley he had the feeling that he had put one world at his back and was about to enter another.

The Trail he saw dipped down to the river flat below him, and then resumed on the far side, climbing another such cliff as lay at his feet. From there, he knew, it went on to Fort Steele and the Wildhorse country on the upper Columbia, where the gold strike that had been the cause of building the Fort originated. For some time the Trail had lain unguarded, with no protection for a man on the American side but his own wits and his gun. But finally the traffic had become heavy enough to bring the usual horde of road agents and the army had moved in.

They had chosen the crossing here where the Trail met the sluggish river, and Dunn could see the tops of the Fort buildings through the trees, and beside them the roofs of the trading post.

He led his horse and pack mule down the switchback to the valley floor, threaded his way through a cluster of shacks housing mostly Indians until he passed the Trading Post, and then swung into the open gate of the Fort close by.

It was smaller than he had expected, with barracks for only a handful of men, the major's residence, the quarter-

master depot, and a building housing civilian employees.

Dunn found Major Cartwright a likeable-enough man, a bit over middle age, obviously a career officer.

He said with little preamble, "Captain, this post exists on supplies brought in. There is little chance to live off the country except for meat. You can see that. And men coming up from the Falls or down from the mines depend on the Trading Post to supply them. Men coming out with gold expect the protection of their government once they cross the Border coming southward." His face flushed. "We're here to protect the traveler and the business man. Lately supply shipments have been taken and a load of bullion coming down was attacked almost before it crossed the 49th parallel." His smile was stiff. "It's just as wild across the Border, yet a devil of a lot safer."

"The Queen's arm is long," Dunn said dryly. "What else, Major?"

"The last payroll," Cartwright said. "Two of my own men shot. One is in the hospital. The other died. Until that happened, I thought we could handle it. I see we can't."

"Who's included in 'we'?"

"Lieutenant Fife is in charge," Cartwright said. "He's a good man. He's taken his squad and scoured the countryside, checked down every rumor, questioned every traveler. He can tell you everything he's found out."

"And your theory, Major?"

Cartwright looked unhappy. "Someone is passing out information. Whenever we get notification, a request to send men to ride up with a pack train or down with a miner or a load of ore, someone gets that information to the road agents and they strike before we get there, or in such places we cannot defend ourselves effectively."

Dunn said almost gently, "Who has access to such information as you mentioned?"

Cartwright spread his hands. "The quartermaster corps, of course, and the civilian employees as well as myself."

"And these civilian employees?"

"Two," the major said. "A William Burke and his sister. Burke is a former sergeant of mine with an excellent record. It was happenstance that he came here. He left the service and went to the mines. He contracted tuberculosis and arrived here half dead some months ago. I treated him and when he grew stronger gave him partial employment. He has a brilliant ability with figures. Then, with Fife having to spend so much of his time off post, I needed additional help. I had notified his sister of his condition and she came up to nurse him. She is a schoolteacher, but as there are no children at the post she has been employed as Fife's assistant."

Dunn said, with no suspicion in his voice, "And the funds for this civilian employ, Major?"

"I have money, Captain. The army supplies room and food. I pay their salaries."

It was a strange situation, Dunn discovered. Burke was able to work only half the time, and when he did build up a reserve of strength, he would use it up going out with Lieutenant Fife on some of his shorter journeys. He had a desire to be in the open as much as possible and no one, knowing his tenuous hold on life, objected. It was his sister, Leslie Burke, on whom the burden of work fell.

And she was fully competent to handle the work, Dunn decided. He met her and her brother, as well as Fife and the other officers, at dinner that night. At his request, Cartwright introduced him for what he was. In such a tightly knit post, Dunn saw no chance of hiding his identity nor his reason for being there.

Leslie Burke was a tall girl, slender without any boniness. She had fine features, he noticed, and a flawless skin drawn over well-molded bones that set off her dark hair and dark eyes. She would have been a beauty, he thought, except for a tight-lipped primness that made him feel uncomfortable.

The girl's brother was entirely different. Tall and sallow, obviously burned out inside, he nevertheless faced life with a mocking good humor that caught Dunn's eye and his admiration almost at once.

After the formal meal, Dunn and Fife retired to cigars on the veranda of the mess hall. The night was a cool one, still without wind. The first sickle of a moon showed above the tops of the eastern mountains. The river could be heard in its slow movements a short distance away. Dunn could feel the loneliness and isolation of the place pressing down heavily on him and he listened to Fife's precise comments with relief at the sense of order they brought.

On Fife's lean, narrow face there was the set of the competent army man. Fife was the kind who through bulldog tenacity and shrewd thinking would make a name for himself.

Fife said, "Find me a lead, Captain, and I'll follow it to hell if I have to."

"I was going to ask you for leads," Dunn said. He examined the end of his cigar and waited for the lieutenant.

"From the few eyewitness accounts we have, there are only three of them at the most."

"Three?"

"It's a matter of strategy, not quantity," Fife said. "They seem to work out the exact location of a place, strike, and retreat. Any number of shipments have gone through—those where we've provided a good guard or where we've met the traveler somewhere before the 'good' places to strike come up. They're cautious, Captain." He made a face. "And too clever for me. I've trailed every possible lead—and all to a dead end."

Dunn said thoughtfully, "If I didn't know better, I'd say it was Tyne we're dealing with."

"Tyne? I've heard the name."

"I lost him almost a year ago," Dunn said. "In the Clearwater country in Idaho Territory. That's the way Tyne operates. I almost had him once." He held up his free hand and scowled at it. "He got away. He's clever and ruthless. He's a hard man to handle, Lieutenant. Someday I'll be free to go after him again. Next time I won't let him slip."

"You sound bitter, Captain."

Dunn peered through the dark at the glowing coal of Fife's cigar. "What would you say of a man who hamstrings a horse to prevent pursuit?"

Fife's cigar end jerked. "Can you describe him, Captain?"

There was an anxiety in his voice that made Dunn speak quickly, "Below medium height, stocky, a full black beard. He's a rough-talking man, Fife, but I happen to know he's well educated. He has a steel-trap mind—and no heart or soul."

"That's your man then, Captain. That's the description I've had. And twice now, miners have had their horses hamstrung."

Dunn let out a slow breath. "He doesn't always kill. A miner, robbed or not, often goes back and tries again—and becomes a victim again."

Fife stirred in his chair. "I wish I could offer more information, Captain. But the rest is guesswork. From what I can piece together, he hangs out close to the Border—ready to jump if caught, I suppose. But he raids below us, too—and he has to get back without following the Trail through here. So he must know the country."

"Which is one point against us," Dunn admitted. "What about the inside help the major thinks he must have, Lieutenant?"

In the darkness, Dunn could see the flutter of Fife's hands as the man spread them helplessly. "That's my responsibility, Captain, but I can offer you nothing. Burke, Leslie, my sergeant, myself, we all have access to information. But none of us has any opportunity to pass it on. If we have, I can't see it."

"If I step on your toes making inquiries, Lieutenant, overlook it," Dunn said. "Sometimes a person not so close to things sees what another might miss."

"Anything, Captain," Fife said. "All I ask is to be in on the kill when the time comes. If it comes," he added softly as he rose to go.

THREE

DUNN rode the hills, sometimes with Fife, sometimes alone. He made inquiries at the Trading Post and among the soldiers at the fort, and everywhere he drew a blank. The few additional trails there were leading off the Wild-horse ended in cul-de-sacs, going nowhere into the hills. His questionings led him down similar paths to similar ends.

He realized on the fourth day that he had little more information than that obtained from Fife. He turned his attention to the office, noting how the work was handled.

Dunn studied Leslie Burke in particular. She seemed almost a machine; only once did he succeed in arousing emotion in her.

She was alone in the office, checking some paper work, and Dunn said, "Miss Burke, is there nothing that can be done for your brother?"

She lifted her head and for the first time Dunn noticed the clear gray of her eyes. They were bleak as she looked at him. "You've seen Will, Captain. What do you think can be done for him?"

"Perhaps a drier climate, rest. With enough money he could—"

She stiffened as if he had struck her. "Are you suggesting Will might be trying to get enough money?"

"Not at all, Miss Burke," Dunn said in his slow way. He smiled at her. "You're very protective of your brother."

"I raised him," she said. Her voice was quiet, emotionless again. She looked down at her papers. "We're twins, Captain, though we might not seem so. Our parents died when we were young."

Later that evening Dunn was standing on the veranda of the mess hall, smoking his cheroot, when Will Burke

joined him. Despite his racking cough, he smoked a strong pipe and now he stood beside Dunn fumbling tobacco into it in the quick, nervous way he had.

Dunn studied the man. There was something in his appearance that tugged at Dunn's mind but stayed elusively beyond the reach of his memory. Then the match went out and Burke spoke.

"Captain, do you have any brothers and sisters?"

"None," Dunn said.

"Then you can't understand how Leslie might feel toward me. She told me what she said to you today," Burke continued. "I can't help but feel that you think she was defending me against your suspicious."

"I have no suspicions yet," Dunn said.

Burke held his pipe, letting it go out. "I wanted to assure you she was not defending me, Captain. Leslie and I are nearly twenty-five. Our parents died when we were twelve. For almost thirteen years she has concerned herself with me. We were in Indian country and Leslie did a little of everything a decent woman could do to live. She managed to feed and clothe us and get both of us schooled. And when I joined the army, she followed me as closely as she could. Only when I went prospecting the last two years did she stay away—until recently."

There was a faint pride in his voice rather than the mockery Dunn had become accustomed to from the man. He said now, "Why tell me this, Burke?"

"I wanted you to know," Burke said. His voice took on its soft gibing now. "I didn't want you to misunderstand, Captain. She's never married. I don't think she ever looked at a man. Always, it's been me. And her reward is —a sick man. A dying man."

"I see," Dunn said.

"No," Burke corrected him, "you don't see, Captain. Leslie wouldn't defend me—she hates me too much."

Dunn went about the plodding end of his work, checking and rechecking, and then he began to notice Leslie Burke's clear gaze fixed on him. He found himself study-

ing her, and for the first time in his life he felt an interest quicken in him at the presence of a woman. He began to see the beauty in her despite her reserve, despite the drab gray dresses she wore with no ornament but small green buttons, despite the almost ugly way she handled her hair, and the way she seemed to withdraw into herself by the quick flattening of her normally wide, mobile lips into a thin, somewhat prim line.

And after a time he noticed Fife looking at him and slowly he came to realize that Fife was in love with Leslie Burke.

Dunn shifted his tactics.

He had been assigned on request a small room off the office where she worked. A door leading into the office was kept locked and he approached the room by another, opening onto the veranda. It was here he sat in the heavy darkness away from the still-thin moonlight, but in a position that enabled him to see the entire yard of the Fort.

On the third night of his watch he saw Leslie Burke moving across the yard from her quarters to the wall not far from where he sat. She disappeared into shadow. Finally he rose and walked down the short flight of steps and turned toward where she must be.

He could see her face, white against the dark. She turned as he approached her.

"I've been expecting you, Captain."

"I thought perhaps it was Lieutenant Fife, Miss Burke."

She sounded almost curious. "Is it that obvious?"

"On his part, yes. Not on yours. You seldom seem to look his way."

"Chet has asked me to marry him, Captain. It was very flattering."

"You still haven't given me any information."

He could feel her eyes on him. "Is that why you came—for information?"

"That's why I'm here at the Fort."

She laughed briefly. "Do you suspect a conspiracy, Captain? Between the lieutenant and myself?"

"No." He felt uncomfortable now, on the defensive. "Why are you out here, Miss Burke?"

"Perhaps I tire of a stuffy room after the office all day, Captain. I like the open air. It's usually quiet here. I can see the stars and the moon and listen to the night."

The moon came from behind a hand-sized cloud, and a thread of its light touched her hair, stroked down her finely boned features, touching lightly her eyes. She wore a different dress, still gray, but no longer drab.

Dunn found himself saying, "I have a job to do, Miss Burke. Don't judge me entirely by it."

"How else can a man be judged?" She was silent a moment and then she said, "Captain, can we sit somewhere? I'd like to hear about your life."

For a moment Dunn was puzzled. Then he realized that in her voice lay the answer. She was lonesome, this woman.

He led her to the veranda, brought a chair from his room, and set it beside the one where he usually kept his watch.

"Smoke if you wish, Captain," she said.

He rolled a cigarette. When it was lighted, he said, "There's little to tell of my life, Miss Burke. I was just old enough to be caught in the last days of the war. Afterward I tried to study law but I was restless. I came west and joined the cavalry. That was ten years ago."

He talked slowly, recalling some of the things he had done, the places he had seen. She let him talk, her hands folded quietly in her lap, her face turned toward his. When he stopped, she said, "Your life is the army, isn't it, Captain?"

"Yes. As yours is your brother."

She rose and he followed suit. "That's a poor analogy, Captain. To you, the army is something to believe in, to devote yourself to. I envy you."

He touched her hand and felt her flesh warm beneath his fingers. She did not move away from him but stood quietly, waiting. The moon came down onto the veranda,

touching her softly as it had before. Her fine, even teeth were visible between her slightly parted lips.

He said, "What answer did you give Fife?"

"He's a friend, Captain. I thanked him. It was very flattering."

He felt the stir within him that her presence brought. Almost roughly he dropped her hand and turned away. "Shall I walk you back to your room, Miss Burke?"

"Thank you, Captain."

They moved side by side across the yard, not speaking. Dunn felt her reserve return and he was not surprised when she stopped short of her door. "I assure you, Captain, I wasn't waiting there to deliver any messages. I go out quite often at night." Abruptly she walked away.

Dunn returned more slowly to his quarters. When he awakened in the morning he realized that he had been postponing an obvious line of action because he had wanted to see more of Leslie Burke.

As soon as he could, Dunn saw Cartwright, requesting permission to set his trap. He expected to use Leslie Burke as bait—to catch her brother.

FOUR

"I'M to bring up at mess the fact that you're through, that you'll be ready to go inside of three days?"

"That's right," Dunn said. "Also, I want information planted in the office to the effect that bullion is coming across the Border. And I'd like you to give an order to send a detachment to meet it."

"I don't like it," Cartwright said, frowning. "I can't believe that—"

"No one has been accused yet, Major. Let's leave it that way, if you please."

The major took the soft rebuke in silence.

Dunn disliked it too, he told himself as he left the major. The more he saw of Leslie Burke, the less he liked what he was doing. Yet this was his job.

He arranged the little room where he slept so that the door into the office could be opened quickly and so that he might see into the room without exposing himself. He slept when he could during the daytime, knowing that there would be little chance for sleep at night. Outside of the major, no one at the post was to know anything about the plan.

That night, the major said, "Captain Dunn tells me he expects to leave within three days or so." His gentle features arranged themselves in a somewhat forced smile. "I for one can say that, despite the reason for his presence, he has helped interrupt the isolation of our post."

Dunn carefully refrained from watching the expressions of the others too openly. No one commented on the major's statement until later. Then, while taking after-dinner cigars on the veranda, Fife said to him:

"Does your going mean you have things wound up, Captain?"

"As much as they're going to be," Dunn said. He made

his voice faintly evasive. "Your previous findings have saved me a good deal of time, Lieutenant."

Will Burke was there, puffing carefully on his pipe. "You're going alone, Captain?"

Dunn caught the mockery in the man's voice. "I can't answer that," he replied. "For obvious reasons."

Fife chuckled softly. Dunn relaxed in his chair. He let the talk drift around him, answering only perfunctorily now and then, keeping the conversation away from the subject which was probably uppermost in all their minds.

As he had expected, the first night he might as well have slept.

The second night, well past midnight, he heard the noise he had been listening for—the soft pad of a footfall going toward the gate of the compound. Carefully he moved outside, staying in shadow. He watched, not the moonlit yard, but the darker places where the light did not reach. Because he knew where to look, he saw the person easily.

He loosened the gun at his belt and edged along the wall of his veranda toward the figure slowly making its way along the shadowy path. He had one foot over the railing when he heard the second set of footsteps. These were swifter but still careful. He paused, seeing the second figure approach the first, the first stop and turn.

From the near distance the guard's voice came:

"Who goes there?"

Someone swore softly. The challenge was repeated. One of the figures, now not ten feet from Dunn, gasped and turned, beginning to run.

"Halt or I'll shoot!"

Gun flame flared from the direction of the guard's voice. The figure that had been motionless chose that moment to run after the other. Dunn saw this latter figure stagger, turn and fall, rise again. Then came a second shot.

Leslie Burke's voice was clear on the night: "No!"

Dunn swore and leaped over the railing. The guard

was in sight now, sprawled in the yard, his carbine on the ground beside him. The two figures broke out of shadow, and Dunn saw Leslie Burke, her arm supporting her brother, both of them running for the gate.

He could have shot then. For a brief moment both of them were delineated by the moonlight. He saw Leslie Burke hesitate, bend, and scoop up the guard's carbine, rise and run on.

Dunn was halfway to the gate when he heard the soldiers coming. He saw Fife stumbling, half asleep, from his room, and he called, "I'm going after them, Lieutenant. Follow me."

He turned and ran on, breaking past the gate. The fleeing figures were out of sight, and then he heard the beat of a horse and saw it coming from the willows along the river.

The horse was carrying two people. It swung away from him toward the Trading Post. A saddled horse was there, outlined by a faint glow that told of miner or traveler still inside drinking out the night. One of the figures left the horse and worked awkwardly into the saddle of the other. It was Leslie Burke, Dunn saw, moving hurriedly but hampered by her long skirt.

Dunn stopped and turned back for his own horse and pack animal. He had his pack ready to lash to the mule. His horse needed only saddling and then he was out of the gate, riding northwestward.

From the direction they had gone, they would ride north along the west side of the river and try to get into Canada. If what Fife had said was true, Tyne had his headquarters in that direction. And they could go nowhere else once they were committed to that route. The broad, sluggish river would lie on their right, the grim, trackless mountains on their left.

He rode leisurely, sure of his quarry.

FIVE

WHEN Dunn arrived at Fort Kootenai, Leslie Burke was not surprised to find that she regarded him as an opponent. It was illogical, she knew—yet had not everything she had ever done for Will Burke been illogical? Looking back on her life, there was always that maddening feeling that a dozen times she might have done things differently and perhaps changed Will.

Each time he had got into trouble, she swore it would be the last. And each time she knew she could not do as she swore to. Will was her family.

So when she received Major Cartwright's letter telling her of Will's illness, she did not hesitate. And as arduous as the trip had been, she felt compensated when she discovered Cartwright's opinion of her brother.

She had lost touch with Will in the middle of his army career and it surprised her to find that the major regarded him as an exemplary soldier, one who had risen rapidly to sergeant and who was definitely officer material. And even though he had left the service for the lure of the Idaho gold fields, when he showed up at Fort Kootenai, sick and penniless, Cartwright still had thought enough of his abilities to give him enough work to keep up his pride.

It was only after she had worked through the cold, damp spring and the dry, dusty summer that Leslie became aware of the true situation. And she understood why Cartwright, nearly ready to retire, remained an obscure officer in command of an obscure post. The man was naïve. He was also careless. Though during his army career, Will had put aside his usual habits and had done nothing anyone could call dishonest, he had filed a great deal of information that he had been able to put to use after leaving the army. And now, she discovered, he was making full use of it.

The night after Dunn's arrival, she went to Will. As always, he treated her with exaggerated courtesy underneath which lay plainly his contempt for her being what he termed a "sucker."

She was a blunt woman, not given to subtleties, and she said, "What are you going to do? This Dunn is no man to take chances with."

Will's thin line of eyebrow went up. "Why should I do anything?" A smile twitched at his lips, mocking her. "I see, you assume I'm the one behind the trouble."

"Don't lie—not to me." She was angry with him but as always when they were together, she felt that pointless sympathy for him. "I've worked in the office for six months now. I'm not blind, Will."

"Not entirely," he agreed.

Despite her anger and her promises to herself, she watched Dunn's reactions to Will. She found the captain a likeable enough man, though she realized that his very quietness and charm made him a dangerous opponent.

His qualities began to impress themselves on her—his polite tenacity, the undercurrent of genuine humor that ran through his talk and lay in his sharp, dark eyes, the pleasant quirk at the corners of his wide, mobile mouth.

She had done a foolish thing, she knew, in seeking him out that night. But it had been on her mind for some time to use her femininity on him in an effort to find out what he thought. It was a strange role for her; she had never before concerned herself with men. Always she had held herself aloof from them, concentrating on Will, on making something solid of the shambles he strewed behind himself. But now, she reasoned, Dunn was a man alone, and by his attitude she could tell his interest in her. There was a time when she was frightened, not sure whether the interest was personal or professional. But there was only one way to find out and so she deliberately walked near to where he was and waited for him to seek her out. It had been a pitiful effort, she thought. And after she left Dunn, she lay on her bed staring into the darkness, feeling still the warmth of

his flesh where it had touched her hand, acutely aware of the attraction he held for her—and miserably aware of what must be going on in his mind.

When she heard that Dunn was leaving and discovered the report of the shipment of bullion coming down from the Canada mines, she sought Will out as soon as she could.

"Let it alone," she said. "Don't you see that it's a trap?"

He looked at her with his deliberately pitying smile. "Leslie, what you need is a man to concern yourself with. Not me—another man." He paused and drew on his cold pipe. "A man like Dunn."

She stood and looked at him, her mouth flattening out in its familiar tightness. And then he began to cough, violently. When he stopped she saw the red stain on his handkerchief and she had to fight to keep from showing her concern.

She said, "What will you do with the money once you have it?"

"What I've always done." He was laughing at her, not hiding his part in it any longer, knowing she would not expose him. "I'll have one last fling, I suppose. The last time I made a pile, I went to San Francisco. You—" He paused and frowned. "But I'm forgetting. You don't approve of a good time, of fun, do you?"

That night she lay awake again, hearing over and over his last remark. Bitterness rose in her. When had she had the time or the opportunity for fun, for pleasure, for relaxation? When had she been free enough of worry over Will to . . .

The next night she remained fully dressed, waiting. She knew Will's mental processes almost as well as she knew her own, and she was sure that this night, the one before Dunn said he was to leave, would be the one chosen.

She heard him moving in the compound and she slipped outside, looking along the line of shadow he must follow. Her eyes sought Dunn's quarters and she wondered if he too stood in darkness, watching. While

she looked she thought she saw a faint flicker of light, a bit of moonlight reflected on metal.

Hurriedly, but as quietly as she could manage, she followed her brother through the shadow, seeking to reach him, to warn him about Dunn. And then she heard the sentry's challenge:

"Who goes there!"

The shot that came froze her into immobility. She could hear Dunn moving. She saw Will fall and rise, saw the gun in his hand throw a burst of flame into the night. The sentry fell, rolling into the moonlight. Involuntarily she cried out, "No!"

She drew a deep breath. Dunn would be on them in a moment. He would know that she had been out there, near Will. He could not have failed to recognize her voice. And Will himself would be charged with murder. She ran to him, seeing him stagger as he tried to move. Her arm went out, supporting him.

"You damned fool," he gasped at her. "Why did you—" He broke off and cried hoarsely, "Run then!"

They paused only long enough for her to scoop up the rifle from the sentry's side, on Will's whispered command, and then they ran again. For the first time in her life, panic she could not control swept over her. She could only follow Will blindly, fighting to keep up with his staggering run, to support him as well as she could.

Despite his wound, he helped her into the saddle of a horse waiting in the river willows. And then there was the other horse in front of the Trading Post and his gasped order, "Get on him. And follow me!"

She was a fine horsewoman just as she was a fine marksman. She could hear no sounds of pursuit and slowly her panic wore off.

Daylight found them in the mountains, following an almost invisible trail that Will seemed to know well. She could see now that he was badly wounded. The sentry's bullet had taken him high in the chest and he had lost a good deal of blood.

He sat tight-lipped with pain and exhaustion while

she formed a crude bandage for him. When she was done, he lifted his arm with an effort and pointed to a near-by ridge. "You can see the valley from there."

She left him and climbed the ridge. She gasped as she looked down. Height held no terror for her, but even so, there was something frightening about the sheer thousand-foot drop to the trail they had come up during the night. Lifting her eyes, she could see beyond the timbered bench where the trail ran to the broad valley far beyond it.

Here the Kootenai twisted northward, kinking back and forth, a thread of silver on the pale green-and-brown carpet of the valley floor. Across the carpet she could see a dark, slow-moving line. Soldiers from the fort, making for the Border, hunting them.

Leslie shifted her eyes back to the trail. She could see almost all of it from halfway up the bench to the very base of the cliff where she lay. At first it was difficult to separate shadow from actual objects because of the first bright sunlight that struck the rock, but finally she saw Dunn coming out from the dark green of the timber.

He moved at a steady pace, not pushing himself or his animals. She judged him to be a good three hours behind them, going at the pace he was, and she knew instinctively that if he were forced to stay three hours behind, he would do so for the rest of his life, not giving up, not turning back.

She had an impulse to get the carbine and attempt to shoot him from the saddle. Never before had she felt the desire to destroy anything, especially a fellow human. But watching his steady, patient progress, she felt an unreasoning hatred for Dunn.

She crawled back to where Will lay. He lifted his head. She told him what she had seen, speaking quietly now.

He swore at her. "What business was it of yours? Why couldn't you leave me alone."

"Be quiet!" she said harshly. "Don't take your temper

out on me, Will. If I'd left you alone, you'd have bled to death by now. We're in this together and we're here. What do we do now?"

He looked at her with his eyes wide for a moment and then he began to laugh softly. He stopped suddenly, coughing, and when he could speak again, he said:

"We go to the Border. That's where I was heading. There's a trail through these mountains. It isn't easy but it can be followed."

"And then?"

"One of my friends is a doctor," he said. "Not much of one, but good enough for now. After he fixes me up, there's a place to go—a mine containing more than enough money to make every man in that army down there rich for life." He lay on his back, resting, his eyes bright with mockery as he looked at her.

"Once we get out of this, little sister, you'll never have to work again. You'll be rich for life." He tried a smile to match the mockery in his eyes. "If we don't get out of it, you won't have to worry either. Captain Dunn and the army will see to that."

SIX

LESLIE looked at her brother for some time. Then she said, "You mean you have a mine that rich and you stayed around the fort to help rob army supplies and prospectors?"

"Interested, little sister?" His mockery came easily again. He struggled to sit up. "Help me on my horse. I don't want that fool Dunn to catch up with us."

"You could shoot him." She helped him into the saddle.

He looked down at her in surprise. "So I could," he agreed. "Is that what you want—if he finds us?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. I'm afraid of him. But I'd rather get away if we can."

"Even if we did kill him," Will said practically, "there'll be others. Cartwright will have the whole fort out scouring the trails for us."

She mounted and rode alongside him. He seemed to gain strength as they rode. They followed a winding trail that stayed parallel to the ridge. Finally they began to climb again, breaking in late afternoon into a small meadow with a creek draining along one side.

"There are fish in there," Will said. His voice was weak now. Probably from the same hunger, she realized, that was making her lightheaded. "And there," he said, pointing. "A pair of fool hens."

She moved across the knee-deep meadow grass to the little finger of brush and timber where the hens were standing motionless, apparently unaware of her. She carried the carbine butt-first and as she came upon the birds, she swung the gun by the barrel. She felt the shock of the butt striking one, knocking it sideways. The other made an awkward beginning at a run and Leslie brought the side of the stock down, crushing it.

She twisted their necks off and left them in the grass

to bleed. She plucked a thread-end free from the hem of her dress and carefully worked out two long strands. These she twisted together and fixed a pin from her hair on the end as a hook. It was the last pin and now her long hair fell free about her shoulders.

She went back to Will, carrying the birds. "Do we camp here?"

"Up above," he said, making a vague gesture. "Hurry up, or it will be too dark to see the trail."

She found what she sought from his saddle blanket, bits of bright red cloth for bait. She did not have to fish long. The trout struck avidly at the bobbing bits of red she trailed across the water. When she had caught three fish, solid ones weighing a good pound or more, Will said, "That's enough."

She cleaned the fish and the birds, wrapped them in wet grass and gave them to him with the knife to stow in his saddlebag. He said, "There are cold biscuits in there. I forgot about them."

She could see the flush on his cheeks, the brightness in his eyes.

He said, "Follow me," and started his horse for the end of the meadow. He turned at the far end, going to his right and putting his horse into the chill water of the creek. On the other side, he followed a narrow ledge of rock, passing by the spray of a small waterfall that left the trail slippery but also washed out all sign of their tracks. A gorge almost too narrow for the passage of their horses twisted steeply upward beyond that, and she lay back, letting Will's horse kick its way up before she followed. Once out of the gorge, she found the trail not too steep, pitching up to a level bench. Here he stopped.

"Let Dunn track us through that," he said. "We can relax here, build a fire even." He pointed to the right. "The meadow is only a hundred feet down from that rock rim there, but it might be a million miles at night."

His voice came hard now when he spoke and she could hear the occasional gasping, choking deep inside him as he fought the need to cough. His flesh was hot

to her touch. Making him as comfortable as she could with their saddle blankets, she hurried to build a small fire and cook the fish and the grouse.

By the time she had the fire built, using Will's knife to hack apart what deadwood she could drag to their camp, it was fully dark and growing bitterly cold.

They ate the burned, half-cooked fish and biscuits while the grouse spit and crackled over the fire. Finally these were done and she supported Will while he ate avidly. Then, lying back, he watched her eat. When he spoke, his voice was stronger again, more assured, and, slowly, she managed to piece out the story he so obviously wanted to tell her.

The three men waiting for him were partners, men he had gone in with in the Clearwater country. In his prospecting in Canada, he had found a vein not of gold but galena. The richness of it made development worth while, although a good deal of capital was needed to get it out of the ground and to have it shipped to the smelters in England. To get the capital, he had deliberately gone to Cartwright and played on the man's sympathy to get a job where he might have access to the information he and the others had used to rob the prospectors and the army supply trains.

"This was to be the last one," he said bitterly. "It would have given us enough for a good start. I know a British outfit that would have gone in with us, share and share alike."

"You have the knowledge about the claim then, and your—your partners have the money?"

He glanced toward her with a tight-lipped smile. "That's right. I have the claim and they have the profits we've made."

"And if you shouldn't appear—if you had been caught at the Fort?"

"If I didn't contact them within a week, they'd come looking," he said. "Seeing those soldiers on the prowl will tell them something's happened. They'll be along." He laughed, coughing a little, and wincing when the

shock of it tore at his wound. "I'm a valuable property."

She said quietly, flatly, "If you should die?"

"*If* I should die, the claim is recorded, Leslie. You're my heir."

"I don't want dirty money!" she cried.

Will was unperturbed. "I earned that claim, Leslie. I've got these lungs because of it. And it's yours, if I die. What you do with it is your own business."

He was silent for some time. Then he said suddenly, "I didn't really mean for them to have any part of it. I figure the money they made from the army payroll and such is enough pay for helping me. I was going to try to get my share of that and keep the claim for you and me."

"Without funds to develop it?"

"I have some money in a bank too," he said. He talked with an effort now. "Honest money—my army pay mostly. It's in San Francisco and so is the deed for the claim and—and the location and instructions. There's a letter there, too, waiting for you. It's an authorization —or my will—it's all the same thing."

She stared pensively into the tiny fire, thinking of the strangeness of this man.

When morning came, she discovered that she could not waken Will. His breathing had become more ragged and uneven, and his face was drained of all color except for the bright flush of fever on his cheeks. She fought down panic, forcing herself to think. If she could follow the trail, she might find the men Will was expecting. That was the thing to do. It was the only hope she had.

She thought about Dunn, and on impulse, she clambered to the rocky rim of the ridge to her right and peered down into the little meadow a hundred feet below. She could see him clearly and the realization that he was so close jolted her. She saw that he was riding about the meadow in widening circles, tracking.

He stopped circling after a while and sat quietly in the saddle staring about him thoughtfully. An irrational desire to mock him swept over her, but she caught herself. She must be getting lightheaded again from hunger.

And that thought reminded her of the pack mule standing in the meadow.

Her eyes studied it thoughtfully. She could visualize the contents of its pack. Beans and bacon and flour, most likely. And coffee. Dunn would have good solid trail food with him. Food and warm clothing and an axe to split firewood with.

She saw Dunn's head come around, scanning upward, and she ducked back, not knowing whether he had seen her or not.

She thought, "I'll bring him up here and when he comes up out of the gorge, I'll shoot him." Saying it to herself was not difficult, but she felt the shock as her own thoughts ran through her.

No, to get his food she would have to think of some other ruse. If she could keep him down there until nightfall, perhaps she might be able to slip down and lead the mule away, pack and all. That would be the best way, she thought, to wait until dark.

Dunn was still circling the meadow. So he had seen her, she thought. Now and then he stopped to peer at the cliff and she made no effort to move out of his range of vision. She wanted him to see her; she wanted to keep him there circling the meadow until evening. She did not stop to consider that darkness was a full day's length away. She could only think of the pack mule. With it she could help Will and escape from the army, find the doctor—get away.

Dunn made another circuit of the meadow and stopped at the base of the cliff. Then, carefully, he hobbled his horse and mule, unsaddling both and laying his saddle and the pack on a ledge of rock a few feet above the meadow floor. After that, he studied the ledge for some time and then began a slow ascent of the cliff.

She must stop him. Once he reached her, she would either have to shoot him or surrender. She was afraid of him. Her mind went back, touching on the night they had talked together, and she realized that she was more afraid of him as a man than as the law.

She lay where she was, noticing the skill with which Dunn picked out the footholds, the strength in the way he thrust himself upward. He was halfway up to her before she realized it.

She picked up the carbine and leveled it, but she was shaking and she dropped one hand away. Her fingers fell onto a rock half the size of her fist. She lifted it, weighing it thoughtfully. Then, holding her arm at full length over the rim, she let the rock fall from her fingers. She watched it, her whole being concentrated. For one brief, breathless moment she thought it would strike him. But then he looked up and saw it and flattened himself against the face of the cliff. The rock bounded over his head and fell free to the meadow below.

Still he did not stop. She shifted the carbine so that he would see it when he looked up again.

"How many warnings do you need, Captain?"

She could make out distinctly the line of weariness cutting through the dark stubble on his cheeks and jaw and the bleakness in his dark eyes as he stared at her.

She was unaware of the way she looked, her hair loose about her face which was streaked with dirt, her stained gray dress visible from the bodice upward. He did not speak and she said, "Go back, Captain. I'd hate to shoot you."

His voice was dry from dust and strain. "Don't be foolish, Miss Burke. You can't run forever. If you come back, it will go easier on you. If you have to be brought back . . ."

Bitterness welled up in her. "Easy or otherwise, Captain, a jail and a hangman's rope are the same."

"I offer you a last chance to come of your own free will."

Panic rose in her. She fought it down. "I offer you a last chance—to go back. Alive."

He looked at her. She forced herself to stare back at him. There could be no yielding, no compromise from either of them. In desperation, she lifted the rifle for one last warning.

She knew her own ability as a marksman and she took careful aim. She aligned her sights on his hat, planning to tick it, to show him that she could shoot, that she did not lack the nerve as she guessed he must think.

Even as she pulled the trigger, she felt she had missed her target—and struck him.

SEVEN

LESLIE watched, frozen, as Dunn began to slide from the precarious perch he had clung to. He rolled limply once, a projection of rock throwing him sideways. He stopped suddenly, lying half against the face of the cliff, half in the air, his body dangling, belly down, across a sapling no bigger than his wrist.

For a moment she could not think, could not move. She felt a laugh burst from her chest. Then she began to cry, jerkily. Finally she stopped and lay where she was, empty but calmer.

She realized that she must find out if he was dead or alive. For a moment she felt anger at him for having ignored her warning and thus having made her shoot him. Then she got to her hands and knees and backed away.

Will moved as she came up, turning restlessly, muttering unintelligible words. He's stronger, she thought, and she bent to feel his skin. It was hot and dry with the fever and there was a peculiar odor that she finally decided was coming from his wound. She had never smelled putrefying flesh before and she had to fight a sudden nausea.

She took ropes from her saddle and from Will's and crawled back up the ridge. Here she knotted an end of each rope about the bole of a stunted but solid tree. The other end of her own rope, she tied about her waist. The second rope she flung out over the rim, watching it until it settled to rest hanging a few feet from Dunn's body.

She began to ease backward over the rim, her feet thrusting down for toeholds. Her heel caught in the hem of her dress and jerked her. For a moment she tottered on the rim and only a violent jerk against the rope

brought her back and over the edge. She lay on her stomach, panting from fear.

But she knew that she could not stop now. She was afraid to leave Dunn too long if he should be alive.

Hurriedly she untied the rope from about her waist and began to undo the buttons of her dress. She shivered a little in her undergarments even though the early sun was warm on her skin. She put the petticoats under the ridge, weighted by a rock, wrapped the dress about her waist as a cushion and replaced the rope. Then she backed over the rim again.

Inch by inch, it seemed to her, she worked her way down to where Dunn rested.

When she was opposite him, she found a solid but narrow shelf for her feet. Cinching the slack of her rope to gain additional support and leave her hands free, she worked her way sideways toward him. She caught the dangling rope and drew it up. She passed two loops about the trunk of the tree which supported him and then formed a lasso and leaned out to cast it.

It was then she saw the blood on the side of his head. For a moment she thought he must be dead, her bullet having struck him in the head. Then she noticed his steady breathing which made his body rise and fall gently in the crotch of tree and rock that supported it. The sudden relief was so shattering that for a moment she could only cling to her perch and watch him. And now she felt a sudden eagerness to get him to the ground.

She had to cast her loop twice before it settled over his shoulders. Slowly she drew it up until it was under his armpits. Then, with equal slowness, she began to pull it taut. His weight came against her hand and arms, and she rested a moment to test the cinching of her own rope and the solidity of the narrow ledge beneath her feet.

Satisfied, she drew on the rope until Dunn was almost upright. His side squeezed along the tree trunk and began to slip free of it. She held her breath. Here was the moment she had been working for. If the extra loops

about the trunk, plus her own strength, did not act as a brake against his fall, he would be flung outward and downward and would strike violently against the cliff face when he finally reached the end of the rope.

Suddenly his body jerked and came free of the tree. She felt the solid jolt of his hundred and eighty-odd pounds against her arms and shoulders. Then the loop about the tree trunk took hold, slowing his drop, easing the pressure on her hands and arms. Gasping and running with sweat from the strain and effort, she paid out the rope. It scored the thin trunk of the little fir. Her eyes traveled from it to the bumping, dangling body that seemed to crawl down the cliff face with painful slowness.

And then there was no more rope. He hung in the loop, his feet still above the ground below. Quickly she freed the extra cinching of her own rope and began to descend again. Her rope ended, leaving her a few feet above the ground. Hastily, she untied it and let herself fall the remaining distance to the meadow floor, her dress fluttering a short distance away from her as she landed.

She ran to where Dunn was hanging and found that his feet were not a yard from the ground. She clambered up the cliff until she was level with his middle, and then with one hand began to work at the knot holding the rope about him while she hooked the other into his belt. When the knot gave way, he dropped with such suddenness that his weight pulled her down on top of him. For a moment she lay where she had fallen, too breathless to move.

Then she rose and bent to examine him. She found the wound along his temple, just above the hairline over his ear. It was a very shallow groove cut by her bullet. The blood was beginning to coagulate so that the dripping of it had nearly ceased. A hand against his chest told her that his heart beat strongly.

Panic came at the thought that he might waken suddenly, and she hurried to her dress and slipped it over

her head. Then she turned to the hobbled animals, untied and led them to where he lay. She got the horse saddled and the mule packed. For a moment she was tempted to get into the pack and find food, but she thought of Will and went stubbornly on with what she must do.

She managed to get Dunn to his feet, supported beneath the arms, and leaned him against the side of the horse. It moved with the feel of the weight and she said sharply, "Hold!"

The horse became motionless and she realized that here was a trained trooper's animal. How well trained, she did not know, but it was worth a chance. She recalled the exercises she had seen the soldiers of the fort put their horses through and now she said, "Kneel!"

Awkwardly, the horse went down on its forelegs, its rump in the air. She heaved with all her strength and Dunn slid belly-down across the saddle.

"As you were."

The horse whinnied with effort and reared upward, settled back. Quickly, she roped Dunn into the saddle, tied the mule to it by the lead rope, and took the reins. She began to walk toward the upper end of the meadow.

It took her a while to find the entrance Will had gone to so quickly, and then she had almost to drag the horse through the narrow gorge and into the open. At last she came over the top of the trail and onto the level bench. She was surprised to find that the sun had arced across the sky and was touching the tops of the high western mountains. She realized the whole process had consumed hours.

She freed Dunn of the horse and made him as comfortable as possible on the bare ground. Unsaddling the animals, she hobbled them near her own and Will's horse, and then eagerly opened up Dunn's pack. The mere sight of the food there made her tremble. She found the small pack of emergency ration—food he had cooked and saved from his supper and breakfast—and

she squatted there by the pack and stuffed it into her mouth.

At last she stopped, ashamed of her own greed. She went to Will and saw that he was lying still again, his fever seeming higher, his breathing more shallow.

With Dunn's short-helved axe, she brought in some good-sized pieces of firewood and built up the fire. She filled his coffee pot and rigged it up over the coals. She also put more water to boil and food to cooking.

She could feel the chill of the afternoon coming as the sun disappeared behind the high peaks. She made another fire, putting the two men between them, laying Dunn on his own blankets now. The coffee boiled, and she took time to rest and drink a cup. It was strong and hot and she could feel the strength flowing back into her body. She ached with weariness but she forced herself to rise, knowing that she was not yet through.

She got a cloth from Dunn's pack and put it in the boiling water. She wrung it out and washed Dunn's head around the gash as well as she could in the failing daylight. Then with the cloth dipped in icy spring water, she rubbed his face vigorously.

His eyes opened, shut, and opened again to stay. There was no look of fever in them that she could see, only questioning. He made an effort to sit up and she pressed a hand to his chest, forcing him back.

"Rest a while longer," she said. "I'll get you something to eat."

He said quietly, his voice clear and normal, "You're under arrest, Miss Burke."

EIGHT

LESLIE threw back her head and let laughter ripple up from her throat. It was genuine laughter, the kind of laughter that loosened the knots of tension inside her.

"You can lie there and say that to me?" she asked him.

"You and your brother," he said in his quiet way. "Fife and his squad will find the trail up here soon."

She shook her head at him in wonderment. "Will is dying, Captain. He's been in a coma all day. Your men won't get here soon enough to arrest him."

"I'm sorry," Dunn said.

She was quick to answer. "Sorry because you can't arrest him?"

He looked at her in amazement. Slowly he pushed himself to a sitting position. "You hate me, don't you?"

She shook her head slowly. "You—as a person? Do you exist, Captain? Is there a you or are you just a job, an assignment?"

Looking at her, he noticed for the first time that she held his gun competently in one steady hand.

He looked away from it. "What do you intend to do then? Why did you trouble to bring me here if you feel that way?"

Why? She realized that she could not answer the question with full honesty because she did not know the whole answer. She said, "Partly because I did not want blood on my hands, Captain. I was warning you, not trying to shoot you." It was an explanation, not an excuse, and he accepted it as such. "And because I need your supplies—and your help."

"My help?"

"With Will," she said. "I don't intend to wait here for Lieutenant Fife, certainly." She moved away to put wood on each of the fires. It was fully dark now and the light

from them leaped up, playing on her features. She was a little unsure of herself at the moment.

"I need help to get Will to the Border. He told me that he has some friends up there. One is a doctor." She kept moving now, the gun laid aside while she dished up some of the food she had cooking for Dunn. He did not move except to turn his head to watch her better.

"There's a trail from here to the Border?" he asked.

"Will says so," she said.

"Oh," he murmured. "But he hasn't told *you*?"

She turned on him. "He hasn't told me. And I don't know. I'm as lost as you are."

"But you do know how to get back the way you brought me up?"

She did not answer. He made an experimental effort to get to his feet. He was dizzy, he discovered, but by being careful, he was able to manage. He turned slowly until he located Will Burke. Walking there, he lowered himself to his knees and bent down.

"What are you doing?" She held the gun in her hand again.

He ignored her while he examined the man. Then he said, "In my pack, you'll find a bottle of whiskey. Bring it."

"That has been half his trouble," she said tartly. "Whiskey."

"Right now it's half the battle," he answered. She did not move and he twisted his head to stare at her.

She was between him and one of the fires and because she had not had the time to replace her petticoats, he could not fail to notice the outline of her fine, long legs.

He rose and walked slowly to where she stood. "I'll need a good deal of boiling water," he said.

"I'm not one of your soldiers, Captain."

Although Dunn's training had instilled in him the rigidity of the military mind, essentially he was a person sensitive to another's feelings. Now he said with no intent of sarcasm, "My apologies, Miss Burke. From now on I preface all remarks with 'please,' even though I for-

get to say it." He returned to Will Burke and dropped to his knees again.

He forced a little of the whiskey through Will's flaccid lips. It dribbled away. He parted the man's teeth with his fingers, poured in a little more liquor, and then, with a quick move, clamped his hand over Will Burke's mouth, holding it shut. Setting down the bottle, he began a gentle stroking of the man's throat.

"Come here and hold his head so he can swallow," he ordered. "Please."

She was on her knees, Will's head cradled against her leg.

Dunn continued his stroking, looking at her instead of the man motionless beside him. The firelight reflected her expression, and a great pity for her rose in him.

"You love your brother very much?"

She was honest with him. "Only out of habit."

The pity came again, and an admiration for her because she was doing what she thought of as her duty. Essentially, he realized, it was little different from the things he did because of duty.

He could feel Will Burke's throat muscles move convulsively. Quickly he reached again for the whiskey bottle. This time the man aided in getting a swallow into himself. His eyes came open. Dunn saw that they were brighter with fever than he had expected.

"Is the water ready?"

"Yes," she replied watching him, not her brother.

"And some rags, please," he said. "There are some clean shirts in my duffel." Will made an effort to sit up.

"Take it easy, fellow," Dunn said. "I want to fix that wound before you rot completely away."

Will's lips drew back over his teeth. "So she ran sniveling to you as soon as I was unconscious."

Leslie returned with the water and some white cloth that Dunn recognized as her missing petticoats. She had overheard the remark. He said, "She brought me here after trying to warn me off and putting a bullet along my head—by mistake."

Will's eyes rolled toward the girl. "Conscience, Sister? Or did you know that the captain fancies himself as an amateur doctor?"

Dunn was shocked at the man's bitterness. But for the moment he made no answer. He was busy with his knife, cutting away the man's shirt from around the awkwardly bandaged wound. The rank smell of it made his stomach wrench. Looking up, he saw Leslie's tight-lipped expression and he realized that it was not disapproval she was expressing but a drawing into herself, a hiding from things unpleasant.

He said in a soft voice, "Burke, being a sick man doesn't give you the privilege of talking like that to anyone. Now shut up and help me in what I'm going to do."

"Yes—sir." The mockery in Will Burke's voice was very faint.

"Keep some water boiling," Dunn said to the girl. "And go drink a cup of coffee. Lace it with some whiskey. You need it. Do anything, but don't look this way."

"I can help." Her voice was stiff.

"I'm glad to hear that. But right now I'd rather you went off."

She did as she had been ordered, taking the whiskey away just long enough to pour some into a cup. He called to her for more water and when she came with it, he moved in order to shield Will from her sight. Will made no sound beyond his stentorian breathing.

Dunn worked in silence for some time. When Will Burke made a low, shrieking sound, Dunn swore at him softly and he quieted. Leslie stood up, moving about restlessly.

Dunn said finally, "Miss Burke, I'll need some more cloths tomorrow. If you'll boil your undergarments, they can be dry by morning."

She went beyond the firelight. Returning, she plunged the last of her linen into a pot of water and moved it closer to the flame. Despite the fires, she shivered a little from the cold.

"Is that all, Captain?"

If he caught the caustic tone, he ignored it. "I'll need something heavy to make a warm outer covering. We can't allow the wound to chill." She was silent, waiting, and he went on, "There is extra clothing in my duffel. But your dress would be better. And you'll find my things more practical for riding in the mountains."

This time she did not leave the warmth of the fire. She gathered heavy underwear, trousers, shirt and blouse, all part of a uniform. The air on her momentarily bared skin was icy and then she had drawn on his rumpled but clean clothing. It was pleasantly warm, although heavy and cumbersome. And because of her height, it was not a great deal too big. She carried the dress to Dunn and started away as she heard his knife rip at the cloth.

"Hold him up, please," Dunn requested shortly. "From the waist if you can."

She complied willingly. Will seemed to be breathing easier. She could feel the dampness of sweat through his coat where her hands pressed his back.

Dunn said, "Let him rest a while. Then we'll feed him and find something to keep him warm."

He moved away, scooping up the dirty cloths and flinging them into the nearest fire. Then he walked slowly out into the dark and she could hear him not far off being violently ill.

After that, she could hear him at the spring washing. When he returned, his pallor was almost as deep as her brother's and she quickly put the whiskey bottle into his hands.

He looked at her, a faint smile quirking his pale lips. "He may need this later. But if that food is still hot . . ."

She dished it up. When he was eating, she asked, "Captain, where did you learn to doctor a man?"

"On myself." He bent to his plate.

Getting herself some food, she found his gun which she had laid aside. She tucked it into the waistband of the trousers she wore and then sat near him, warming herself by the fire.

NINE

DUNN awoke to the gray chill of first daylight. He found he had fallen asleep close to the fire where he had sat to eat. Leslie had rolled him in one of his blankets. He rose stiffly, feeling the throbbing of his head at the movement, and built up both fires.

Leslie was huddled in his mackinaw, having put the other blanket over her brother. For a moment he stood staring down at her, noting the deep lines of weariness in her face. He had never before noticed how genuinely lovely her mouth was when, as now, she was off guard. He saw in her a great deal of beauty that he had not noticed before.

Dunn turned away and went to where Will Burke lay breathing harshly. Will was awake, his eyes fixed on Dunn.

"She *is* beautiful, isn't she?"

"At times," Dunn agreed cautiously. "You have an odd way of displaying your affection, Burke."

"Affection, Captain?" The old mockery covered everything else in his voice. "Admiration sometimes, perhaps. But I don't know about affection. I never stopped to think about it."

"You're lying," Dunn said. "Unconsciously so, perhaps, but you're lying about it."

Burke nodded, a smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. "All right, Captain, let us say affection out of habit, shall we?"

Dunn shrugged and waited for the other man to speak.

"What are your plans, Captain—for us?"

"First to get you in shape to travel," he said.

"So I can be put in jail?"

"Yes."

Dunn busied himself with preparing coffee and breakfast. Will Burke watched him.

"And my sister? Do you intend to arrest her too?"

"I have no choice," Dunn said. "Her actions have condemned her."

"You're being blinded by duty, Captain. Leslie had nothing to do with it. She—" He broke off, coughing. Dunn moved to his side and held his head up until the spasm passed. He saw the bloody foam flecking Burke's lips and he wiped it away gently before he lay the other man back down.

Will Burke said when he had his breath back, "She's spent her life protecting me. This was just one more instance of it."

"It may be," Dunn agreed. "But the army can only go on what evidence it has. Everyone at the Fort knows by now that she rode off with you, that she was there when the guard was shot."

"That was my doing," Will Burke said. "I lost my head."

Dunn only shrugged. "It's not up to me to be a court. I have to bring you both in. That's my job."

"I know," Burke said. After a moment, he added, "I was with Tyne when you were chasing him in the Clearwater, Captain. I know how tenacious you can be. You think you're just going to pack us on horses and take us back to the Fort—like that."

"And alone if Fife doesn't come soon," Dunn replied. He continued his preparations, not looking at Burke. His guess was that Leslie Burke could expect little leniency unless something came up to change the appearance of the evidence as it now stood. He could not help wondering what prison life would do to Leslie Burke. Would her inflexible will stand up under it day after day when her brother was no longer alive? It was obvious that Will Burke could not live much longer under any circumstances. "Yes, I'll have to take you back," Dunn said.

He heard Leslie and turned to see her on her feet, his gun held in one steady hand. Her voice was clear. "In that case, Captain, I'll have to tie you up."

Dunn studied the gun gravely and then returned to his cooking. It was not bravado; he simply wanted to

eat before she did anything concrete about her threat. She let him go ahead. He fed Will Burke and then dished food for the girl and himself.

She sat some distance from him. The food and warmth had returned some of the color to her face and drawn out much of the weariness.

Dunn took a second cup of bitter coffee and rolled himself a cigarette. "Having me tied will make things very awkward for you, Miss Burke."

"I can manage."

"And what do you intend to do?"

"As I told you last night," she said, "go on."

"To your brother's friends?"

Will Burke smiled. "It's not over a day's journey to the Border, Captain—if you know the way."

"Fife wasn't over half a day behind me," Dunn said. "That gives me an advantage. Having to handle me as well as your brother will slow you down, Miss Burke."

"I can leave you behind," she said. She sounded as if she were talking to herself. "I can leave you tied here for Lieutenant Fife to find."

"*If* he finds me," Dunn said. "I doubt if he's any better tracker than I. I'd rather you shot me than left me to starve."

"I may have to, Captain."

Dunn smiled and took a final pull on his cigarette. "You couldn't before. I doubt if you can now." He indicated Will Burke. "Your brother might but you would have to give him the gun first. And that would be the same thing."

Her answer was plain. "Damn you, Captain!"

Dunn rose abruptly, and set about cleaning the camp. He packed the load for the mule and then returned.

"I'll change that dressing," he said to the girl, "if those clothes are dry."

She indicated them on a stick before the nearer fire. "See for yourself, Captain." She still held the gun and although she seemed relaxed, he knew that any move on his part would alert her quickly enough.

While he worked on Burke, Dunn said, "I could have taken that gun from you while you slept."

"I know, Captain. But you didn't."

He examined the exposed wound and hastily wrapped it with fresh bandages.

Rising, he went to wash his hands in the near-by stream. She walked over to him, standing carefully a few feet away. "Well?"

His glance was bleak. "Your brother has to get to a doctor." He hesitated and said, "In his condition, he hasn't much chance. He'll live through today—with luck."

She appeared neither shocked nor upset. "Are you suggesting that we go back to the Fort—for a doctor?"

He could see no guile in her expression, no recrimination.

He said with equal honesty, "Even if we did, there's no guarantee that he will live."

"The chances are nearly as good if we go on?"

"It depends on how long it takes," he said. "And how rough the trail is. The ride back to the Fort isn't easy. That one ahead may be better for him. I can't answer that question, I'm sorry."

She was silent and he went on, "I'd say that going on is an extra risk. But the profit is your freedom—and his if he should live. The other way, whether your brother lives or dies, both of you will be charged—he with murder, you as an accessory at the very least."

"At the very least," she said softly. "I—" She cut off her words, clamping her mouth into the harsh line he had come to know so well. "The answer is obvious, isn't it, Captain? But there is Will's opinion too." She walked quietly to where her brother lay.

Dunn finished his washing and followed. He heard Burke say, "You follow this ridge trail until you come to a bench. On the far side is a branch of the old Boundary Survey route of the fifties. That will take you to the Border. The camp is in a draw straddling the line." His eyes flickered toward Dunn and he smiled mockingly.

"The cabin is in the United States, Captain. Ten feet north is the Border."

"Is this the only trail?" Dunn asked. "Are there any forks?"

"One branch where you pick up the Boundary Road at the end of the bench." Will Burke admitted. His voice was surprisingly strong. "But keep easterly. The other fork goes northwest but I don't know to where. No one I know has ever followed it."

Leslie Burke stepped away from Dunn. "I shall have to ask you to help me get Will into the saddle."

He smiled at her. "And then while he holds the gun, let you rope me into mine?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It would be a lot easier if I gave you my word," Dunn said. "Easier on us all."

She glanced at her brother and he smiled. "He'll keep his word, Sister. He's the kind that would keep his word to a pack of howling Indians if it meant a knife in his throat."

"Your terms, Captain?" She sounded satisfied.

"For twenty-four hours," he said without hesitation. "If we haven't reached the Border by then, I'll do my best to bring you back."

"And if Fife and his men catch up with us—what then?"

"If you plan to fight with him, I'll pull out. If you surrender, I'll stay."

She seemed dubious again, and he said stiffly, "I'm not bargaining or pleading, Miss Burke. Do what you like."

She put the gun into the waistband of the trousers she wore. "If you'll help me with Will, please . . ."

Will Burke said, "You still haven't a chance if you meet Tyne, Captain."

"And you expect us to?"

"I'm counting on it," Burke said.

TEN

WHILE Dunn carefully put out both fires, Leslie Burke crawled cautiously up to the ridge and peered over. Dunn was ready to leave when she returned. He glanced up to see her standing pale and tense.

"Lieutenant Fife is down there. I think he's found the trail up."

Dunn hurried along the path to the ridge. Looking down, he could see the tiny meadow cupped below, and the figures of a squad of five men. Fife was facing the others, giving an order. The men saluted, wheeled their horses, rode from the meadow out of sight. Fife then turned his own mount and pack animal and cantered to the upper end of the cul-de-sac. He disappeared from Dunn's view. Puzzled, Dunn rose and returned to Leslie Burke.

He described what he had seen. She said quietly, "He has found the trail then."

"How long will it take him?"

"Two hours at the most," she guessed. "Less if his animals aren't too tired."

He said, "At the speed we have to ride with your brother, Miss Burke, Fife can catch us before we've gone two *miles*."

He saw by her expression that she realized this as well as he. Something in him went out to her in admiration for her bravery even though it was based on an incomprehensible code that forced her to protect her brother despite her receiving nothing in exchange but trouble.

Dunn said, "You two start down the trail. I'll see if I can't set up a decoy."

Her initial reaction was obviously one of distrust. Dunn did not move, simply waited for her to make up her mind. Finally she gave a reluctant nod and picked up the reins of her brother's horse. Tying them to her saddle,

she started off. Will Burke rode slumped down, his face set with pain from the movement of his horse.

Dunn called, "Keep off the trail if you can. Leave as little sign as possible." He thought he heard Will Burke laughing but he couldn't be sure.

Leslie Burke stopped where the trail edged into the timber. Looking back, she said, "Captain, you're putting yourself in a position of aiding criminals to escape."

He answered quietly, "I gave my word, Miss Burke."

He watched her settle back into the saddle and ride on, thinking with quiet amusement how much like one of his troopers she looked from the rear. Seeing her face close up, no one would have trouble identifying her sex. But from a distance, with her hair tucked up under the campaign hat, her long legs encased in his extra blues, her full breasts hidden by the looseness of his blouse and mackinaw, she would have passed more than a quick inspection.

He turned away, frowning a little.

When both horses were out of sight, Dunn surveyed the clearing. Eastward the ridge bulked up; to the south the trail dropped toward the meadow. Westward the forested slopes rose steeply to the jagged, snow-capped peaks not far distant. He turned his horse that way, following a deer track that carried him by twists and turns north and west and finally onto a narrow, almost treeless bench. He studied this for some time and then returned to the camp.

Quickly he erased as well as he could the initial sign of the two horses going northward and sought to make it appear as if they had taken his own west-bearing track.

Back on the narrow bench, he built a small fire, and while it burned to coals, he tried to create the impression of a camp having been made there. The fire itself was sending smoke straight into the air and should, in itself, act as a decoy. His work done, he put out the fire and led his horse and mule along another deer track that went up a steep rise. At the top he mounted and rode

northerly, forced by steep slopes on his left to work away from the rough folds of the mountains.

He topped one low ridge after another and finally found one that gave him a view down onto the campground of the night before. Leaving his horse, he climbed onto a low pinnacle of rock, adjusted his field glasses, and rolled a cigarette.

The cigarette was about finished when he made out the lone rider coming up the pitch and into the clearing. With his glasses, he made out that it was Fife.

Dunn smiled in grim satisfaction at the way Fife worked about the camp, studying the fires and the traces left there. Then he started northward without hesitation. Dunn swore. The man could not be that clever a tracker. He had gone on, totally ignoring the sign that was meant to lead him to the west. Swearing softly, Dunn turned to his horse and rode on.

Instead of giving them an hour, he had saved them nothing. He cursed Fife for his cleverness and himself for his own inadequacy. He would have to reach Leslie Burke and warn her that Fife was less than two hours behind her.

He could hear them below and to his left when he was still above the thickest of the timber. He pushed on a little faster.

They were within hailing distance when a ravine stopped Dunn. It was steep-sided, perhaps twenty-five feet deep, and thick with buckbrush and wild berry thickets. The pitch and the brush together were more than his animals could handle. He turned north, seeking the end or a way across. He found nothing but he managed to keep pace with them. They were not ten yards away now and he halted, intending to call.

He was drawing breath to shout when he heard the sound of riders coming rapidly. He bent forward, patting his horse to quiet it. The riders came from the north —at least two, perhaps a third.

Suddenly the deep rumble of Tyne's unmistakable

voice rose in command: "There's Burke with one now. Get that cavalryman!"

Then Will Burke cried out, "No, that's my sister, damn it . . ."

The sound of the riders moving forward stopped almost opposite where Dunn sat. He heard Tyne say, "By God, it is a woman! Put away that gun, Ritter."

Will Burke spoke again, his voice almost too faint for Dunn to catch the words. "There's a cavalryman just behind us. Let's ride out of here."

Dunn trembled with anger. Tyne, the man he had sought for months and who had still eluded him—Tyne, wanted for every crime in the peace officers' books and the army's books as well—was within hailing distance. And he could do nothing. He could only sit and listen to the arrogant voice as the man took charge of the situation.

"Ritter, you go south. And shoot anything that moves."

Will Burke spoke again. His voice was too faint for Dunn to hear more than a murmur. Tyne called, "Ritter!" and sounded as if he was riding after the man. Dunn caught a glimpse of them through the trees, talking. He knew Tyne by his squat stockiness in the saddle; the other man was taller and leaner.

He sat helplessly, watching Ritter ride south. Tyne wheeled his horse and trotted back up the trail.

"Let's go," he said briefly.

Leslie Burke spoke now for the first time. Her voice was clear and precise. "You can't ride fast. Will has been shot. He needs a doctor."

Tyne said, "We got a doctor. Hilton, you ride alongside Burke. Tell me quick when he stops holding up." He paused and added, "We'll have to keep it at a jog for a time then."

"I'll make it," Will Burke answered. "The sooner we get to the shack and I can lie down, the better."

A hesitant voice said, "He doesn't look well, Tyne. Go as slowly as you can."

Tyne cursed. "You're the doctor, Hilton. But don't be an old woman about this. See that he makes it—that's your job. I'm worrying about the cavalry—that's my job. And I say we ride as fast as we can."

Will Burke's laughter came, again choked off by his racking cough. When he could speak, he said, "You're in a hell of a spot, aren't you, Tyne? If you want the claim, you have to get me cured. That means getting me to the cabin alive enough for Hilton to fix me up."

Dunn drew his horse and mule back from the edge of the ravine and followed, trying to keep them within his hearing. He wondered how much Will Burke had told Tyne in that speech said too low for him to catch. As far as Dunn knew, he had spoken only of a cavalryman behind them. That could mean Fife or him.

The irony of the situation struck Dunn. To get the information he needed—whatever it might be—Tyne apparently had to keep Will Burke alive. Yet to get him to the place where he might have a chance for survival, they were going to have to ride at far too fast a pace. Judging from the sounds of the hoofbeats, Dunn knew their speed was too great. Will Burke would be lucky to live another hour.

He was concentrating on keeping them within earshot. The track he was following broke around the top of the ravine and precipitated him onto the main trail. Before he could do more than swing the mule into line behind him, he was jerked to a halt by a rough voice not a dozen feet away.

"Reach, Trooper!"

ELEVEN

DUNN looked at the silent group drawn to a halt on the bench near where the trail branched. The man Ritter who had brought Dunn in had a grin on his bearded face.

Hilton, the one Dunn understood to be a doctor, was a sallow, long-faced man, clean-shaven, his hair thinning and lank when he took off the old campaign hat he wore. He was hovering by Will Burke and Dunn could see that Burke himself was unconscious in the saddle.

Tyne was swearing as he looked at Dunn. He was little changed, Dunn saw. "Do something, Hilton," he commanded. "And do it fast."

"Why worry?" Ritter asked. "This is the cavalry that was trailing 'em."

Leslie Burke sat her horse in rigid silence. She looked once at Dunn and then straight ahead to where the trail forked.

Dunn swung his horse close to Tyne's. "Burke has a bad chest wound, Tyne. If he isn't treated immediately, he won't last a half hour."

Tyne spat. "What's it to you, Dunn?" He glared at Will Burke. He started to speak to Dunn again, changed his mind and glanced toward Leslie Burke.

"You say the cavalry is only a piece behind?"

"I didn't say," she answered quietly.

Ritter said, "It was Burke said that about the cavalry. He said there was one. This is it."

"That outfit heading along the Border this morning is liable to find their way here, though," Hilton said. His voice was reedy and a little frightened.

Tyne looked at him contemptuously. "Afraid they'll cut your liquor off in jail?" He jerked his head at Ritter, "You ride up trail and keep an eye out while the Doc works for his night's bottle."

Dunn placed Hilton now, although he had only seen him once and briefly in the past. He had been cashiered some time before for bungling an operation and for dereliction of duty while drunk. And this was the doctor Will Burke had been seeking! Dunn looked at Leslie Burke and saw a look of doubt lying heavily on her face.

Tyne was scratching his head. "If Burke dies, we whistle. We've done too much work to get cheated now." He fixed his eyes on Hilton. "Try to remember what you used to know, damn you. Do something!"

Hilton lifted a hand and Dunn saw his long, spatulate fingers quiver. "What can I do here?"

"You can change a bandage, can't you? You can bring him around!"

Dunn said quietly, "He's still got the bullet in him, Tyne. His flesh is rotten. It will take more than a change of bandage now."

Tyne looked him over with deliberate contempt. "What is your stake in this, Dunn?"

"You," Dunn said. "As for Burke, I don't like to see a man die needlessly. He needs a doctor—a good doctor."

Tyne's laugh was rough. "Hilton's a good doctor. Ain't you, Hilton?"

There was an odd dignity about the man now. "I was," he said. "Now—there's nothing I can do for him."

Tyne lifted himself with a hard thrust of his short legs against the stirrups. His voice roared out with uncontrollable wrath.

"Get him off that horse and bring him around. I don't care if you cure him. I want him conscious, that's all." He began to swear at Hilton, viciously.

Dunn swung his horse so that it came alongside Tyne's. With a backward slash of his hand, he drove Tyne's lips against his teeth, splitting them.

Tyne was between Hilton and Dunn, making it impossible for Hilton to shoot. He spat blood, his hand reaching for his gun. Dunn's own hand slid out and pulled the gun from under Tyne's groping fingers. He swung his horse away, keeping the gun on Tyne.

"Cool off," he said flatly.

"Drop that, Captain." It was Hilton's voice. The forty-four in his hand was steady.

Dunn said with soft amiability, "It's even up, Hilton. You can shoot me, but I'll get Tyne while you're doing it."

Dunn moved his horse farther away, keeping his gun on Tyne, ignoring Hilton completely. Dunn managed a look at the girl. His gun was still in the waistband of her trousers but she made no move to draw it. She had not fully comprehended the situation yet. Tyne still meant little to her except as a man with a doctor.

He said, "Can't you see that Hilton is no use to—"

Hilton was watching Tyne now, waiting for an order. Tyne in turn was looking at Dunn, and slowly the angry color receded from his face and he began to breathe normally. He interrupted Dunn:

"You'll get no place this way, Captain. Turn the gun on the girl, Hilton."

Dunn did not move, simply stared at him. Hilton did as he was told and Leslie Burke paid no attention. She was looking at her brother.

Dunn said, "You're not gaining anything either, Tyne. Burke is dying and when he does, you'll have lost a fortune." It was half guesswork, half calculated challenge. His agile mind had worked over the situation, piecing together what Burke had said to him and what Tyne had said to Burke. He knew, too, the man he had to deal with. There was no compunction in Tyne. Once he had what he needed from Will Burke, Tyne would get rid of him. And Leslie, if he felt she stood in his way. Now Dunn's eyes challenged Tyne, seeking to bring back his devouring anger.

Tyne grinned suddenly, mocking Dunn. "Forget the gun, Hilton. Get Burke out of the saddle and onto the ground. He can't ride any farther now, that's obvious. And if the Captain here wants to shoot me, let him."

Leslie Burke saw Hilton moving toward her brother's

horse and she left hers, running to help him. She helped the man lower Burke to the ground.

"Bring him around," Tyne ordered.

Hilton brought a canteen from his saddle and knelt beside Burke. Dunn stayed where he was, watching in silence. If they waited much longer, Fife would come down that trail. Leslie, he noticed, had thought of it too for once she glanced over Hilton's shoulder southward.

Tyne apparently caught the significance of the look. He said, "Hurry it," to Hilton. If the gun Dunn still held on him gave him concern, he didn't show it.

"Water's no good," Hilton said. His sensitive face shone with sweat. "He's close to dead, Tyne."

Leslie winced. Tyne's lips moved in silent profanity. With an abrupt gesture, he reached into a saddlebag and came up with a bottle of whiskey.

Tyne tossed the bottle contemptuously to Hilton, who caught it eagerly. "It's for Burke—not you."

"If I had a drink, I might—"

"Last time you worked on a man drunk, you killed him," Tyne said. He glanced at Dunn. "You'll find that in the cavalry records, won't you, Captain?"

"That and more," Dunn admitted.

Leslie Burke was looking at Hilton as he wrenched the cork from the bottle. The smell of it rose to his nostrils and, shaking, he tilted the bottle to his own mouth, gulping frantically.

"That's enough!" Tyne roared at him.

Leslie rose and stepped back, looking from Hilton to her brother. Dunn felt a surge of pity for her.

She said, "This—we were taking Will to him?" She turned to Tyne, incredulity on her face. "This is the only doctor?"

"The one your brother meant," Dunn said as gently as he could.

Tyne was laughing. Hilton lowered the bottle and his hand was almost steady as he bent toward Will Burke again. Now he worked as Dunn had, stroking the

liquor down the man's throat. It took hold, wakening him, bringing open his eyes. From where he sat, Dunn could see that they were filmed. There was little life left in the man.

Tyne left his horse suddenly, striding toward Will Burke. Dunn said, "It's my pot now, gentlemen. Miss Burke, round up their horses."

Tyne still seemed unconcerned. "And then, Captain?"

"Then we wait for the cavalry," Dunn said.

Will Burke's head moved. "Your word, Captain." He spoke faintly but with his unfailing mockery.

"Not forgotten," Dunn said. "I'm suggesting that Miss Burke ride." He glanced at her briefly. "You still have most of the twenty-four hours."

"I'll stay with Will, Captain."

Burke twisted his head with a distinct effort, looking from her to Dunn. "Don't be a fool, Leslie," he said sharply. "How long do you think either of us will last when Tyne finds out I can't give him his share of the claim?"

Tyne was very still. "You're lying, Burke."

Will Burke laughed at him. "Lying, Tyne? Why should I—now?" He stopped, fighting for breath. "Give me some whiskey."

Hilton lowered the bottle to Burke's lips. After a moment Will managed to say, "The information—the deed—everything—in a letter in my San Francisco bank." His eyes were suddenly too bright, his voice too strong. "And if I die, it's fixed so that everything is Leslie's." He was laughing again and then his throat seemed to fill, choking him. "So if you want it, Tyne, you'll have to keep me alive. Or marry my sister."

The vicious joke only made Tyne swear. Burke rolled his head. "Go on, Sister. Get away while you can. Maybe the captain will be satisfied with what he's caught here and leave you free."

She did not answer. Tyne was looking at her thoughtfully. He said slowly, "Then you really don't make any

difference, Burke. The girl is all I need. After she's been with me a while, she'll be glad to send for her inheritance."

Dunn looked at Will Burke and saw by the man's twisted expression that he realized his own cleverness had lashed back on him. He had been trying to persuade his sister to go while she could and to taunt Tyne at the same time. But she had not gone, and now Tyne knew how valuable she was to him.

Dunn said easily, "You're wasting your time and your wind, Tyne. If Miss Burke doesn't go now, you won't get her. There's a cavalryman not far off coming this way."

Tyne looked at him and laughed. Will Burke made a move as if he might sit up. "Damn it," he cried with surprising strength, "that's Fife." His eyes fixed on Dunn. "Fife was in it with me. Don't you see—he's on Tyne's side!"

TWELVE

IT took a moment for Dunn to understand what Burke meant.

Fife, he thought. And he pictured the smooth, smiling young lieutenant. Fife tracking the road agents alone and returning empty-handed. Fife sometimes taking Will Burke, the sick man, with him on short trips. Fife, the man through whom all the information passed. Now he saw why Lieutenant Fife had come up the trail alone from the meadow, why Fife had been able to find it so easily, why he had not been misled by Dunn's false tracks.

And the one man he had been counting on then was Tyne's. Dunn said, "I'm still holding the gun." He spoke to Leslie Burke, his voice carrying urgency. "For God's sake, get their horses and get started. Can't you understand?"

"Will . . . ?"

"It's true, damn it," Burke whispered. "It's true. Get away from Tyne while you can. Get across the Border so Dunn can't get you, and keep going. You'll be a rich woman, Leslie, if you can get to San Francisco. The information is all there—the firm that wants to lease the claim, everything. But get away now." His voiced failed and then rose again. "I know Tyne. If he gets his hands on you, he'll do anything to make you sign over the claim. Anything."

"Lieutenant Fife . . ." she began. Dunn knew she was thinking that Fife had proposed marriage to her.

"Fife is no better. Fife knew you were my heir. That's what he wanted you for—in case I should die."

She did not answer, did not move.

Burke had another drink. "I swear it, Captain. My sister knew nothing of my part in what's been going on. She suspected—that's why she was there that night. She was try-

ing to stop me, to keep me out of your trap. She's always protected me, Captain. I've told you that before. You can see—she's trying it even now."

He paused and sought breath. "She knew nothing—not even about my claim until I told her two days ago. Get her away—make her see that Tyne and Fife—" He broke off, a cough choking him, making him shake with its ferocity, sucking at the last of his energy.

Tyne made a sudden move, jumping behind Hilton. He jerked Hilton's gun from its holster and swung it toward Dunn, keeping himself shielded.

"Ritter!" His voice was like the blast of a foghorn reaching into the distance. "Ritter!"

Dunn stayed where he was. If he missed with that first shot, Tyne would get him before he could try another.

"Ritter!"

Dunn could hear the faint beat of a horse coming. He glanced at Leslie Burke, who stood motionless, looking from Tyne to Dunn, her mouth drawn in its firm line.

Dunn said, "Burke, I gave her my word. I'll still not take her in before the twenty-four hours are up. That's more chance than Tyne will give her."

"I know," Burke said, understanding. He rolled, throwing himself up on one elbow. His other arm lashed out, catching Tyne's thick ankle. Dunn saw death sweep over his face with the exertion. His last words echoed in the air, sounding above the swearing of Tyne as he pitched backward.

"Ride, damn it—Leslie."

Hilton staggered as Tyne's hand clutched at his shoulder. Both men went down. Tyne rolled free, lifting his gun and firing. Dunn felt the numbing shock in his fingers as the gun was torn from his hand. He could hear the sound of Ritter's horse close by now. It was too late. Leslie Burke had waited too long.

With one hand on the reins, the other hanging numbly, Dunn swung the horse about, heading for the girl.

She had the gun drawn and in a slow, deliberate manner she was aiming it at Tyne. Tyne dropped down

behind Will Burke's motionless, sprawled body. Dunn saw and understood her hesitation as he came alongside her. He caught her with his arm, forcing his numb fingers to hook about her, lifting her with the weight of his body. As he pulled, he was reining the horse about, swinging it toward Will Burke's mount.

Tyne shot once and Dunn's see-saw movements made him miss. Now he hesitated, not wanting to hit Leslie. She tried to bring her gun to bear on him, but the horse was too jerky. Then she did as Dunn wished, twisting about and sliding into the saddle of Will Burke's horse.

"Good girl," Dunn said. His left hand plucked the gun from her fingers and he swung about, shooting as Tyne shot. He felt Tyne's bullet clip the horn of his saddle.

Leslie Burke was struggling to get the carbine from the boot and Dunn cried, "No!" He drove his horse against hers. "Ride!"

Tyne shot again as Dunn wheeled away from her. The bullet scoured the rump of the pack mule and it leaped forward, hind hoofs kicking, and raced up the trail. Ritter was in sight now and he had to jerk his horse savagely into the brush as the mule came at him. The sight of the horse and rider sent the mule skittering to a stop and it turned and bolted in the other direction, up the west trail and out of sight.

Leslie Burke cried out, "Will . . ." and then Dunn saw her shoulders sag as realization finally took hold of her. She straightened then and spurred her horse after the mule, her legs too short for the stirrups, gripping the animal's belly fiercely.

Dunn turned and a bullet lashed at him from the side, sending his horse cutting, making him hold his fire. He saw Ritter coming out of the brush back onto the trail, shooting as he rode, and he fired point-blank at the man. Ritter's horse chose that instant to rise up, and took the bullet in its chest. Ritter went head-first out of the saddle and fell spread-eagled on the trail.

Dunn sawed the reins, forcing his horse about, spurring it up the trail after Leslie Burke. He had waited here,

perhaps foolishly, he thought, for her to go. Now that she had gone it crossed his mind to stay and try to take Tyne and bring him in. But the knowledge he had about Fife prevented him from doing so. This was not the time, he told himself bitterly. It seemed that the time to take Tyne never came.

And even as he rode the small thought which had been nagging at the back of his mind came into the open—Leslie Burke rode an unknown trail alone. If she did get free of Tyne, there was still the army, and sooner or later some of them would find this trail. And even if there was neither Tyne nor the army, there were the mountains.

He twisted about at the top of the pitch and, looking back, discovered that he could see the clearing. Tyne and Hilton were getting into their saddles. Ritter was getting up from the ground. Coming from the south was a lone rider in cavalry blue. Fife. That meant four against himself and Leslie.

Dunn came up onto the bench where Leslie Burke had caught the mule and tied it to the cantle of her saddle. Now she waited for Dunn. In her hands she held the carbine, pointed at him.

"Go your own way, Captain. I'm alone now. I risked my freedom for Will, but that's no longer necessary. I'll shoot you before I go to jail."

Pity for her rose in Dunn. He said, "It's not me you have to be afraid of. Tyne won't rest until he gets you and forces you to sign over the legacy."

"Nor will the army rest until it gets me." Her bitterness welled up from deep inside. "They'll have Will now, I suppose."

"At least they'll give him decent burial when they find him," Dunn said. "That's more than Tyne is waiting to do."

She was silent and they could hear the coming of horses. Dunn said, "Fife is with them now. If you're going to ride, get going. I'll try to hold them off."

"They want me, but they want you too." Leslie's eyes

went wide. "And because you know about Fife, he won't stop until he kills you."

"He can't," Dunn agreed.

She said, "Where will we go?"

"To the Border." His eyes met hers and in his gaze lay the truth of what went on in his mind. "The Border won't stop Tyne, but at least the army won't be after you."

"And you?" She was openly curious now.

"My job is to get you free of Tyne first," he said bluntly. "After that, I'll bring Tyne and his men in."

THIRTEEN

NEITHER Leslie nor Dunn knew where the trail led, but they kept riding, their horses panting and stumbling, the mule now and then dragging in protest. Shortly before sunset, they went over a saddle with snow lying not fifty feet above them. The air was chill and Leslie Burke's strained features showed the effects both of it and the savage, relentless riding forced on them.

How he and Leslie managed to stay ahead, Dunn did not know, unless it was because Tyne knew this trail no better than he.

They were about to go on when Dunn stopped, peering down through the folds of mountains to where a tiny dot showed the clearing where Will Burke had died. Leaving it, coming up the trail, he made out pinpoints that were blue-clad riders.

He said, "The cavalry found the trail and came down from the north. That means Tyne can't stop either. If we could throw him off the trail, we have a chance."

"We?" She did not wait for him to answer but rode on.

He saw that she still could not comprehend what he was doing. He was not sure that he understood it fully himself. Certainly aiding her escape went against all his training, all his inclinations. And he knew that the sensible thing to do would be to try to double back on Tyne and Fife and seek the help of the cavalry far below them. That would be the sensible thing but he knew that even if he had not given her parole for twenty-four hours, it was what he would not do. It was fixed in his mind that he must get her free of Tyne, and to do that he must get her across the Border where they could maneuver more easily. As long as they stayed on this side, there was always the danger to her of the army.

It was as though he had made a promise to Will Burke

—a promise to a dying man. And although he had not, the idea was there in his mind, patterning his thoughts.

Leslie remained in the lead even after they had crossed the saddle where the snow lay just above them. On the other side they could see the end of the mountains. To their left and below gleamed a great expanse of water, two large lakes connected by a narrow neck. The trail dropped steeply. It was a natural passageway from the Kootenai Valley west through these mountains to the great lakes below them.

Now Dunn knew where they were, his memory recalling a map of this area. He called to Leslie to halt, his breath frosting in the sharp air. "As far as I remember, we're off any of the Boundary Commission trails." His voice was quiet. "There's nothing down that way for us until we get across those last mountains."

"And then?"

"Then," he said quietly, "there's the army at Pinkney City on the Columbia."

Leslie Burke looked northward. The mountains seemed endless but one peak appeared higher than the others. "How far is the Border, Captain?"

"A day's ride," he said. "If there's any kind of trail." He tried to smile at her but his face felt stiff. "That highest mountain is Boundary Peak. Once on the far slope, you're safe."

"Safe from the army," she corrected him. Her eyes met his. "Why are you doing this, Captain? You know I can't make the Border within the time limit. Does it please you to hound me?"

"I'm not hounding you, Miss Burke," Dunn said. "How long would you last alone in these mountains? I told you I would help you get to the Border and away from Tyne."

There was no understanding in her eyes, no belief of what he said. To her he represented the army, the hunter. She the quarry. And now without her brother to hold her back, her one thought was to free herself from him.

"Whatever you may think," he continued, "remember Tyne is still behind us. Let's ride on."

Wordlessly, she turned, settled in the saddle, and started down the steep slope of the trail.

It was darkening fast now. They were nearly up to timberline here and eastward early night had already come, as it would soon come to them.

"We can't rest now," Dunn said. "Unless you want to get caught up here in the dark."

"There's a cut in the rock here, Captain." She indicated the sheer cliff face on their right. "It seems to go in a long way. I thought perhaps if we followed it, we could be going northward instead of west."

Dunn left the saddle and walked stiffly into the cleft she indicated. It was not over half a dozen feet wide and at one turn it narrowed to little more than the width of a horse. Not twenty yards from where he had left her, the cut broke into the open. In the distance northeastward he could see a low-lying saddle below the level where they were. Timber squeezed it in but it was clearly a passable exit from the jumble of rock and icy peaks which hemmed them about.

Dunn walked forward and found that he was on a narrow ledge of rock. Below, separating him from the distant saddle, was a great gully too deep for its bottom to be seen. To his left the ledge seemed to run allongside the gully and blend into timber that could be on a flat or on a mountain slope. To his right, the wall of rock he had just come through rose sheer and cold.

Dunn returned and climbed into the saddle. "There's a chance," he said. He told her what he had seen as he led the way into the cut. "There's a possibility we can follow the ledge and go around the north end of the gully and reach that saddle." He paused and then added, "There's another chance too—that we'll break our necks."

"And an even better chance that Tyne will catch us if we go on west," she said. "I'll try this."

When they reached the ledge, Dunn had her wait while he walked back to the entrance of the cut. His eyes studied the flinty ground. Their animals had left no tracks here, no sign. Unless Tyne were watching sharply,

he would go on past. But not for long, Dunn knew. Sooner or later, the complete lack of sign on the west trail would tell him that he had lost his quarry.

Dunn turned back toward the ledge. "Tyne will have to make camp—until there is moonlight anyway. We have a chance if we can get to that pass before morning. In the daylight, he could see us going through it."

Leslie was silent, studying the empty blackness below, the narrowness of the ledge they stood on. Her voice was cool when she answered. "All right, Captain."

Dunn led the way, walking ahead, leading the horse and pack mule. Leslie Burke followed, holding the reins of her horse loosely as he had instructed her. The horse balked now and then, stopping so that the reins jerked free of her light grip and she had to turn and fumble for them where they trailed on the ground. But it was safer than having them tight about her wrist in which case, should the horse slip and go over the edge, she would be carried with him.

Dunn walked slowly, carefully. The night closed in with surprising speed. He began to walk closer to the rock bluff on his left, feeling along it with one hand.

After a short time he stopped, knowing the foolishness of this. Because it was wide enough for him did not mean that it would be wide enough for the horse and mule. At any moment the trail could narrow enough to pitch them over the side.

He stopped and called back to her. "We'll have to wait for moonrise; I can't see my own feet."

Her steps ceased. Dunn cautiously worked around the horse and mule until he was at her side. By feel, he estimated the width of the ledge to be over five feet at this point. It was a good place to stop. He said, "It was twenty feet wide when we started. It's narrowing fast."

"I'd guess we've come over half the distance," she answered. "Maybe more."

They sat with their backs against the rock, waiting. The cold began to grow intense as night closed in completely. Looking up, Dunn could make out faint stars, but one

by one they disappeared. Clouds were scudding over, blotting them out. Dunn could feel his hands and feet numbing.

He said quietly, "If those clouds thicken, there won't be any moon, Miss Burke." In the darkness, her face was only a faint blur. "That would mean camping here for the night."

"If we could," she said.

He understood what she meant. At this altitude the temperature would drop below freezing soon. They both knew there was only one answer. Whether there was a moon or not, they would have to keep moving.

FOURTEEN

DUNN had Leslie Burke go first, roped to him. He tied the two horses and the mule in tandem, holding the lead rope himself.

"Test each step," he said. "And hug the inside."

"I've been in mountains before, Captain."

She started off, walking slowly but steadily.

Moving as they were, the cold seeped through their clothing and heavy boots, making each step a jolt of dull, wearing pain; the cold deepening and thickening like a blanket of ice wrapping around them.

Ahead he felt her stagger, heard the gasp of her breath. Before the rope could grow taut, he moved swiftly. He put his back to the rock wall and sought bracing for his feet on the rock surface of the ledge. His hands worked at the rope, getting a loop in it. He could feel the loop clamping about his palms as she gave a single, sharp cry, and then she became a dead weight against him.

His words came out in a jerky gasp. "Hang on. Reach for the rope."

Her size was something he had forgotten. Her weight kept working against him, trying to pull his shoulders from the rock wall, trying to slide his bootheels free of their scanty holds.

She had uttered no sound since the lone cry of panic but now he heard a grunt of effort, the scrape of a boot-sole on rock. Tension went out of the rope and he took in the slack and jerked again.

Her hand appeared, a faint whiteness, almost at his feet. He saw it groping blindly, hunting for something to cling to and he could only pull against her, he dared not lean forward to help. Her fingers worked about until they found a projection of rock and then, slowly, she came up over the edge and lay, face down, on the trail at his feet.

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Leslie Burke could only suck in great lungfuls of the cold air. Dunn felt his legs begin to shake. He eased down to a sitting position beside her, unwound the rope from about his hands, scarcely feeling the burns it had scoured into his palms.

She stirred and tried to sit up. He helped her and they sat side by side.

She was the first to speak. "I stumbled. The ledge slants just up ahead, and I heard running water a short way beyond."

"Falling water?"

"Just running water, I think. Like a stream."

He got to his feet and untied the rope from about his waist. He eased over her and walked forward. He felt the ledge turn on an angle to make an outward slide just at the point where he judged she had begun to slip. He dropped to his knees and eased forward again, feeling with his hands now.

He could hear the water running. He cocked his head, trying to picture it. A stream, he thought, moving quickly over rock. But not a waterfall. And it came from the left, not directly ahead. Lifting his head, he peered into the blackness, and it seemed to him that he could make out the dark bulk of trees massed only a short distance away.

He continued forward on his hands and knees. The sloped part of the trail was not long, nor was it too steep for a man not standing upright. Then he found a place where it dropped almost sheer. He lay at full length and reached out an arm. His fingers scraped against rock, plucked something cold and soft. It was a tuft of grass.

He stood up now, crouched, and threw his body forward in a jump that left him spread-eagled when he landed, his face buried in damp grass, his fingers digging into dirt. When he could sit up, he heard the close sound of water running, and smelled the scent of pine and cedar sharp in his nostrils.

He called to her and her voice was surprisingly close. When she had slipped, he thought, she could not have been over ten feet from here and safety.

"Can you hold on?" he asked. "I'm going to make a fire."

"All right, Captain."

Dunn found a piece of dried cedar for a torch. He could make out his surroundings now. The wall of rock that had been on their left curved westward, and the gully ended at the point where he had jumped. The grassy clearing was not over a dozen feet wide and then the trees began, a dark, thick mass that sloped quickly upward to more mountains. The stream came down from the west, running through the grass and then along the edge of the timber, flowing eastward.

The flames threw up a bright, sharp light, reflecting off the wall of rock and showing him clearly the slope and the gap in the trail.

With light to see by, he found he could step across the gap and ease himself onto the slanting trail without too much danger. From there, he worked on his hands and knees to the level where Leslie was.

The rope was about her waist and his before he sent her toward the clearing. She went by running, able to keep her balance now that she could see, going swiftly and leaping the last few feet, landing on her hands and knees in the grass.

"All right." She untied the rope and held it.

He fastened his end of the rope onto the reins of the lead horse. "Get out of his way!" he yelled, and with his hat he slapped the animal on the rump, sending it running through the flickering light. Leslie pulled, and then it was beside her, skidding to a halt.

The other horse caused no more difficulty, but Dunn found the mule of a different frame of mind. It showed no inclination to go at all. It planted all four feet balkily and refused to go on. The fire was dying now. The mule stood stubbornly and Dunn cursed, cavalry style.

He could hear Leslie Burke laughing. Leaving the mule, he crossed to where she stood with one end of the rope in her hand. "Damn it!" In his weariness, he thought she had become hysterical.

"Your voice carried beautifully, Captain," she said. "And a mule is still a mule, isn't it?"

Dunn felt himself flushing, and then the humor of it struck him and he let laughter come, easing a little the tension inside.

"I'll try again," he said.

"The fire . . ."

"Let it die," he told her. "It was taking a chance. If Tyne has found the cut in the trail, he may have seen it. If not, I don't want to trust luck any more than necessary. There'll be light enough if I hurry."

He went to the stream and filled his hat with water and returned to the mule. He let the animal wet its lips and then stepped away, easing backward, letting it stretch its neck thirstily. It lifted a foot and lurched forward. Another. Dunn kept moving, feeling the sweat start out on him and course down his ribs. A single misstep would throw him into the cold blackness of the gulch below.

Leslie Burke said, "Gap right behind you," and he stopped.

"Pull!" he ordered. "Pull like hell!" He made the jump, the water spraying from his hat. When his feet hit solid ground, he dropped the hat and grabbed the rope that she had drawn taut and threw his weight in with hers. The mule tried to stop and for one frozen moment Dunn saw it tipped by the weight of the pack. Then it righted itself and bounded goatlike the remaining few feet to the solidity of the grass.

Beside Dunn, Leslie Burke dropped the rope and slumped down. At first, he thought she was laughing again, but then he realized that she was crying and he turned away.

He busied himself tending to the animals and rebuilding the fire farther back behind the shoulder of the rock so that it would not be visible from the other end of the trail where they had started, and set on the coffee pot.

The cold seemed less intense here, although he knew that was not true. They needed as much fire as they dared have to fight off the heavy frost that was settling.

He worked hurriedly, reheating what cold food had been left from previous meals. Each movement was agony.

Finally he went to where Leslie lay. She did not move when he touched her. He bent, trying to draw her upright. She was solid beneath his fingers, yet soft and rounded as a woman should be. He could not make her stand and after a moment he slid an arm underneath her legs and carried her to the fire. He laid her on a blanket in the warmest spot he could find.

He rubbed her hands roughly, bringing a little warmth to them. When her eyelids fluttered, he brought coffee, making her drink it, scalding as it was. He got a saddle to support her back, covered her with a blanket, and then sat near by watching her cradle the hot cup in both hands. Her eyes were large and grave by the light of the fire.

Dunn dished up the food—a few beans, some salt pork, some reheated biscuit. They ate avidly despite their weariness and gulped hot coffee until it was all gone.

Dunn said, "Can you walk?"

She threw the blanket aside and rose without his help. She stumbled but continued doggedly until she could move freely again. Then she returned to sit down and watch him smoke his cigarette.

"I'm sorry I caused so much trouble, Captain. It won't happen again."

Dunn did not point out that she had borne up longer than anyone had a reasonable right to expect. "You were suffering from exhaustion—in the medical sense," he told her.

"Why were you so determined to bring the mule across just at this time—for the food?"

For the second time within the hour he forgot that she was a woman. "Food, hell!" he said explosively. "That fool animal was carrying all my tobacco."

She laughed warmly, and after a moment, he joined her. "A strange motive for risking your life, Captain.

But then many people do things for strange motives, perhaps."

For the first time in their relationship, he felt no shred of antagonism from her and so he was quiet, content to have things remain that way—at least until the moon showed through the clouds and gave them light enough to travel by.

As if reading his thoughts, she said softly, "We may have to travel in the dark again, Captain."

"Or wait till daylight."

"No, Captain. That would give Tyne too much advantage."

He sat and looked up into the clouded sky, his eyes seeking a sign of coming moonlight.

FIFTEEN

LIEUTENANT FIFE did not like Tyne or his men, and he did not bother to hide his feelings. Darkness caught them just below the pass and Fife insisted they make camp.

Tyne sat his horse stubbornly. "I'm not going to let that girl get away," he said shortly. "Nor Dunn." He swung around, glaring at Fife, who was drawing his mule off into a small clearing.

"Where are they going?" Fife asked reasonably. "Let them wear themselves out. They can't travel in the dark any better than we can."

"Sure," Tyne said softly. "Let Dunn lead the girl back to the army and make his report."

Fife shrugged. "At least then you'll know where she is. It won't be too much of a job to break her out of the Fort jail." He was tired and irritable. Damn Tyne, he thought.

They stayed where they were, Fife unloading the mule, Tyne sitting his horse stubbornly. He knew Dunn better than Fife did. Months of dodging the man, of escaping him often by sheer luck, had given him a respect for Dunn that Fife could not have. If it was possible to travel in the dark, he knew that Dunn would do so. If there was any way humanly possible to throw them off the trail, Dunn would do that too.

"Damn it," he said, "how are you going to get the girl out of an army jail when you'll be in one too?"

Fife turned, peering at him through the gloom. "Are you threatening me, Tyne?"

Tyne said, almost laughing, "Dunn knows your connection with us—Burke told him."

Fife could do nothing but stand where he was and feel the jolt of the man's words in his midriff. Essentially, he knew, he was an army man. He had come up to his

present post easily enough, a product of wealth and a childhood of ease. At first it had been an adventure, and then the wealth of his family had melted away, and his career had turned into a necessity. Now, though, he found a pleasure in the military life; he had no desire for any other.

But to a man accustomed to money, living on a lieutenant's pay was harsh, even in the wilds. Fife did not like Burke any better than he liked Tyne, but he had never let personal animosities stand in the way of advantage to himself. He liked Leslie Burke little more, thinking her a prude and a fool for devoting herself so blindly to her brother. But he knew more about Will Burke's thoughts than Tyne did and he realized quickly enough that Leslie was her brother's heir. With Burke obviously dying, he began to court her.

It had never occurred to him, as it had to Will Burke, to cheat Tyne and the others of their share. Within the limits of his morality, Fife was honest. He had joined Tyne; he would stick by him.

Now, he thought bleakly, everything he had planned was changed. It had seemed simple—herd Leslie Burke to where Dunn could turn her over to a cavalry unit. Once she was in jail, see that she was taken away by Tyne and his men. Now the last thing he wanted was for Dunn to contact the cavalry.

He said thickly, "We have to get Dunn then."

"The girl alive—Dunn dead," Tyne replied. He was enjoying himself hugely, watching Fife's expression in the dim light. He could almost see the man's mind shape up what he had said, pull it apart, and finally accept it and what it meant. "Anyway," he continued, "this is a good place to wait for Ritter."

Hilton had been silent throughout the ride. Now he spoke through chattering teeth. "I'm cold. Give that whiskey around, Tyne. Or build a fire."

"No fire," a voice said. It was Ritter. He came out of the darkness leading his horse, stomping the chill from his feet. "The damned cavalry came down from the north,

found our sign and turned up this way. They're bedded not a mile below us."

It was Tyne's turn to swear. "Do you think they've seen us?"

"If we saw Dunn and the girl ahead, they probably saw us in the same places," Fife said. He began to tighten the hitch on the mule's pack. "Do like Hilton says and pass your bottle around."

"And let him get sodden and have to be nursed?" Tyne said. He seemed impervious to the cold, sitting his saddle easily, his thick mackinaw still open at the throat.

"One drink around," Fife said.

Tyne took the bottle from his pack. He squinted at it, took a short, quick pull, then passed the bottle to Fife. There were two drinks in it, Fife saw. No more. It was supposed to be Tyne's joke—a shot all around, with Hilton getting the bottle last, and empty. Somehow it was not funny to Fife. He had watched Hilton shake and jitter through the long day, fighting his craving every step of the trail, saying nothing, only waiting and hoping.

Fife looked at Tyne, and then turned to Hilton. "You next," he said, handing him the bottle.

Hilton took the bottle, gulping greedily his share and a little more. He returned the bottle to Fife, who handed it to Ritter. "Kill it," he said. He was cold and tired but he didn't want a drink. His mind was too busy with a new thought, the realization that if Tyne caught Leslie Burke, then Fife himself would be just so much excess baggage.

They rode on in the darkness, following the barren trail to the summit, moving slowly, not speaking. It occurred to Fife that Will Burke was dead and no longer able to identify Tyne. Should Dunn die and the girl be caught, then there would be only himself to be able to turn on Tyne. It would be better for Tyne to get rid of him then, if things worked out as he wanted them. One less man to share with, one less danger to worry over.

Fife laughed softly. To protect himself, he would have to join Tyne in killing Dunn and at the same time find a

way to get Leslie Burke safely into the hands of the army. Once she was in jail, he would have a bargaining point with Tyne.

Leslie, of course, might tell the major what her brother had said about his connection with Tyne. But he had little doubt of his ability to handle the situation once they were back at the Fort. His word would be stronger than hers, certainly, and it would take very little to cover the traces of what he had done, shifting everything onto Burke's dead shoulders.

From ahead, Tyne said, "All right, this is the top."

It was thick dark now. There was no way of telling the trail from any other part of the terrain. They drew together to plan this out, none of them foolish enough to try to go down the slope in the darkness.

Oddly enough it was Hilton who made the only practical suggestion. "There's cedar not far back there. Let's make some torches."

Tyne considered this. "Once over the crest," he said, "that army outfit won't be able to see the light."

"Dunn will," Ritter commented.

"Dunn knows we're after him anyway," Tyne reminded him. "You and the doc here go back and get some wood for torches. Hurry it, too."

They gave a pretty poor light, Fife decided. He discovered that by staying a fair distance behind the man ahead and walking with his horse, he could do a little better than the others.

The trail became a mass of rubble. Down below the blackness was absolute, without any sign of a campfire. Tyne said, "It's too damned cold to risk that. They're either going on in the dark or they've turned off somewhere."

The way he said it made Fife realize that he was determined to go on, no matter what the trail might be like. He plodded after them, stopping once to light his second torch.

"Good trail here." Tyne's hail came from some distance ahead.

Fife was doggedly picking his way over the rubble. He called, "Go ahead. I'll catch up." An idea was working in his mind, an idea of how he would proceed if he were in Dunn's place. To make his position stronger, he called, "This damned mule . . ."

"We'll wait."

Fife swore under his breath. "And waste your torches? Go ahead."

He could hear them move off. When he came to where the trail smoothed out, he stopped. This, he thought, might have been it. No man, unless he happened to be thinking about it strongly, would figure that another had not gone on down that smoother stretch of trail after the weary path-picking through the rubble behind. Fife lit his third torch and with it, took a moment to look about himself.

He found the cut. Leaving his horse, he went through it on foot. He stopped as his light spread out, telling him he was out of the cut and on a ledge. Leaving the torches propped between two boulders, he walked forward carefully, carrying a handful of pebbles. One by one he tossed them forward, listening. At the fifth pebble, he stopped. It had not struck rock—it had made no sound at all.

Turning about, he looked northward. He started in that direction, tossing pebbles and listening carefully. Each rock made a soft tinkling sound as it struck somewhere in the distance. A ledge, he thought. A few more steps and he discovered horse droppings still fairly fresh, and he knew that he had guessed right.

He was about to go back when he saw a faint light. He stood motionless, peering into the darkness. The light grew, flickered, and leaped up. A campfire, he thought.

He continued to watch the flickering light, puzzled because it kept going down, fading, until finally it disappeared completely. He thought, "Not a campfire but a guide light."

Fife retraced his steps back to his torches and blew them out to conserve them. He sat on one of the boulders,

smoking his pipe. If he stayed here and waited for moonlight or morning to go on, Tyne might come back looking for him.

Going back to the trail, he pulled his horse and mule into the cut as far as he dared, and then sat down to wait, shivering in the increasing cold. If Tyne did return, he could say he had used up his torches and had come in here to wait for daylight.

He continued to sit, standing now and then to stomp about and keep his feet from freezing.

With the dawn, he led his horse and mule along the ledge, going at a steady pace. The sun was well up and breaking through the scudding clouds when he reached the end of the ledge and the beginning of the grassy, timbered bench. He saw the campfire, cold and carefully covered, and the unmistakable signs of two horses and a mule going westward.

He was about to push on when he decided to water the horses and wash in the stream in an effort to cut some of the weariness from himself. It was only after he stumbled and nearly fell that he realized how tired he was. He became aware of hunger as he saw the horse and mule tearing avidly at the damp grass.

He looked back along the ledge. "I could camp," he thought. He could camp in the trees, making a fire out of sight of anyone coming along the ledge but keeping himself in a position to see it. Dunn's and Leslie's tracks were plain; he would not lose them.

His decision made, he set up his camp, building two small fires and rolling out his blankets between them. He ate as much as he dared and cooked extra food that he could eat cold if he found it necessary.

When he awakened it was late afternoon. Stiffly he got to his feet and hurried to the edge of the timber. He saw them then, Tyne and the others, like specks against the rock wall of the cliff. It had taken them longer than he would have supposed to find this trail.

He ate some of the cold food, saddled the horse and

loaded the pack on the mule. Then he rode after Dunn and Leslie Burke.

Darkness caught him at the foot of the saddle and snow came out of the sky, thick and wet at first and then small and stinging, driven by an icy wind from the north. He tried to make the summit, saw the futility of it, and pulled off the trail into a thick stand of timber. He could go nowhere in this. But then neither could Tyne—nor Dunn and the girl.

SIXTEEN

THE moonlight, when it came, was not as bright as Dunn had hoped for. A thin cloud covered it, letting through only a faint radiance. But there was enough for him to make out how the timbered bench on which they were curved around this end of the gully toward the saddle that lay between the snow-capped peaks to the east.

Leslie Burke rose. "I'd like to go, Captain. There isn't much left of my twenty-four hours."

The companionship that had warmed him was gone. He saddled the horses and reloaded the mule. They put out the fire and mounted and rode eastward, Dunn in the lead.

He looked up worriedly now and then as a thicker cloud blotted out the moon. He said, "It may storm. And a September storm at this altitude means snow."

She did not answer but rode on, swaying a little in the saddle, her shoulders slumped, her head down as if she were half asleep. He knew that she was not, because every now and then she would look up into the sky and then settle more tightly in the saddle. She wanted to go faster, he thought, to press their horses, but she was wise enough to curb herself, to husband the strength of the animals as well as her own.

The moon broke completely through the clouds at one point and Dunn was able to study the landscape. They had only to stay along the edge of the timber and shortly they could turn to make the climb through the saddle. By the time they reached it, the grass was white with heavy frost and the sky was beginning to show a line of light to the eastward. There was no trail and they had to stop and wait for the dawn light to let them see their way through the tightly bunched trees, but finally they broke out onto the bare top of the saddle and looked into the full gray daylight of the morning.

The first hint of sunrise was showing against the rim of the distant mountains eastward but there too the clouds were piled up in an ugly gray mat. To their left, northward, he could see the well-defined cap of Boundary Peak. He could not see land beneath the mass of trees, but he had a few glimpses of a thin thread of silver and knew it for a stream that flowed northward across the border and joined the Kootenai River in Canadian territory.

They started on. The pitch was now gentle, now steep, until finally they leveled out beneath great cedars six and eight feet thick at the butts, their tops tangled together to form a canopy against the sky.

They came to the creek. It was fair-sized and it flowed slowly with deep pools between narrow chutes of white water. It was low at this season and along sand bluffs that came to the water's edge on the far side, the high water mark of the spring runoff could be seen.

One such freshet had eaten a shelf in the bank and had receded, leaving a deep overhang a dozen feet back. Dunn slowed down and studied the overhang. He glanced toward Leslie and saw that she was riding with her eyes closed, her hands lax on the reins, and he hesitated no longer.

The stream was shallow just above the overhang and they forded easily. Dunn helped her gently from the saddle and got her to lie on the dry sand that made a smooth floor well toward the back of the small cave. He unloaded the mule, unsaddled the horses, and hobbled all three in a small pasture he located some fifty feet back. That done, he gave her a blanket, rolled himself in the other, and closed his eyes wearily.

Mistily he thought, "Her twenty-four hours are up." Sleep took him almost before the thought had formed.

He awoke to the feel of the late afternoon sun on his face. He sat up, blinking in the bright light, and rolled to one side, out of the glare. A single shaft of sunlight slanted from between clouds that were now massing fat

and black in the west. It would rain soon, he thought. He was glad they had come down from the peaks. Up there this would be snow.

He was still groggy from sleep and it took a moment for his mind to begin functioning fully. With a start now, he looked around.

She was not there but he could hear her coming. Quickly, he threw aside the blanket and got to his feet. She stepped under the overhang, her arms full of dry wood. She had taken the time to comb her hair and wash.

He was very quiet, enjoying the fine line of her profile, the firmness of her jaw, the straight shape of her nose. She turned to put down the wood and noticed him studying her. For a brief instant their eyes met and held and his own were the first to look away.

"You might help me with this wood, Captain."

"Sorry." He shook his head, still feeling stupid from the heavy sleep. Taking it from her, he tossed it down. "I'll get some bigger stuff." She handed him the axe and he went away, leaving her to build the fire.

With his arms loaded he returned to the overhang. She had the fire going nicely and was putting food on to cook. Dunn glanced back at the lowering sky.

"I'll get in as much wood as I can," he said. "It's going to storm."

She lifted her head and looked at him. "Will we be here that long, Captain?"

"It depends on the kind of storm it turns out to be," he told her. "You ought to know that—you've been in the mountains before."

She smiled faintly at his reminder of her snappish reply of the night before. "So I have," she murmured. "But what if Tyne found our trail?"

"He probably has," Dunn said. "We couldn't fool him forever." He glanced toward the mountains which they had come through, barely visible through the trees. "It depends on how far he gets before the storm breaks. If

he's up there, he'll get caught in the snow. If not, we'll wait here for him."

"Wait here, Captain?"

The intensity in his voice was strong. "I'm tired of running from a criminal, Miss Burke. We have two guns."

"Are you defending me or yourself?" she asked.

"You mostly. It's you he wants."

Dunn went away, stopping this time at the creek to wash cold water over his face and hair. By the time she had the food prepared, he had a good pile of dry cedar, fir, and solid, long-burning birch.

They ate in silence. When they were drinking their coffee, she spoke.

"Just what are your plans, Captain?"

"A compromise," he said with faint humor. "We'll try to make the Border and find a place there to stand Tyne off. He has to be stopped sooner or later, Miss Burke —unless you want to run from him the rest of your life."

"Once there," she pointed out, "you have no authority, Captain."

"No more than Tyne. No more than my gun."

She was quiet a moment, poking at the fire with a slim stick. When it began to blaze, she threw it into the flames and looked at him. "You realize, Captain, that you're liable to face a number of charges doing what you are?"

"I realize it," he admitted.

She was silent again for some time. Then she said, "If I should turn myself in, Captain, what chance would I have of proving my innocence?"

"There would be my testimony, Miss Burke." He felt her eyes on him steadily. "I have your brother's statement. Since it was made on his deathbed, it will carry a good deal of weight."

"It would carry more, wouldn't it," she asked, "if you could bring Tyne in to stand the charge?"

"Yes." He did not see what she was driving at.

"But if Tyne and his men are dead—if you could stand them off—then there is only your word?"

"Of course."

"And perhaps Lieutenant Fife's word against yours?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Dunn said. The sharp logical action of her mind surprised him. He realized that he had not thought at all clearly recently. He had been wholly concerned with their survival rather than with what would happen if they did survive. But, he realized, he would need more than the word of a criminal now dead to accuse and convict a fellow officer.

"Do you have any suggestions?" he asked her.

"None."

Out beyond the overhang it was growing dark. The clouds had massed too thickly for any trace of sky to be seen. It would be black dark soon.

"I'm going to ride back and check the pass trail while there's light enough," he told her.

She cocked her head, listening to the soughing of the wind in the tops of the trees. "Be careful, Captain."

He said as he readied himself to ride, "The wisest thing might be for us to cross the Border and then swing east until we come to the river crossing. If the garrison is there, I can turn you over to them and then try to bring Tyne in."

"I rather thought that was what you had in mind, Captain."

He said almost roughly, "Then if I don't get Tyne, you'll have some measure of protection from him."

"In jail," she said. She turned away, reaching for more wood to put on the fire.

He saddled and rode back across the creek and northward the way they had come. There was a low ridge where he remembered having been able to look back and see the last mile of trail looping up to the pass. He stopped there now and studied that bare section. Tyne would have to cross on his way down.

There was no sign of anything. The wind picked up in a sudden gust and the first thick drops of rain fell. The wind dropped and rose again, driving a sudden burst of

rain down against Dunn's upturned face. He lowered his head, reining his horse about.

He was fairly certain they had not yet crossed the pass. There had been no sign but his and Leslie Burke's on the part of the trail he had retraced. And this storm would be a blizzard up above.

The darkness was intense when he returned to the grazing site. The mule stood with its tail to the wind and rain and Dunn was about to unsaddle his horse near it when he realized that Leslie Burke's animal should have been there too. He swung around the clearing. It was empty but for the mule.

He hurried now, riding to the overhang and leaving the saddle to run into it. The fire burned steadily. The carbine and part of their provisions and one of the blankets was gone. So was Leslie Burke.

SEVENTEEN

HE stood motionless, looking about, feeling anger shake him. The anger was not at what she had done—he could understand that—but at the time she had chosen to do it.

Cursing steadily now, he ran back to his horse and climbed into the saddle. With an effort he slowed himself down, forced himself to think with precision. Then, deliberately, he returned to the overhang and made preparations for the journey.

The wind came in sharp, shuddering gusts now, boring through the massed trees overhead. He stayed as close to the stream as possible, keeping it on his right. After ten minutes of travel he heard the rush of water and knew he had come to a falls. Leaving the horse, he fumbled his way through the darkness.

There was only one way to go, he found—only one way Leslie Burke could have gone. The river turned northeastward here and turned sharply, apparently dropping into a canyon. He had to angle slightly to the west to stay in the flat of what must be a narrowing valley.

The wind picked up strength. Ahead a dead limb crashed to the ground. Off to his right, a heavy animal ran lumbering through the brush. From the snort of alarm from his horse, he guessed it was a bear. He thought of Leslie Burke riding blindly and alone in the tearing wind and lashing rain. He cursed her again, seeking to relieve his mind of the worry about her that pressed on it.

He had ridden what he estimated to be over an hour, when he felt the wind die. He was unaware of it at first except as a feeling. There was an emptiness in the air. Then he became aware of the silence. For as long as it would have taken him to count to a hundred there was

no sound but that of his own passage—the clop of the horse's hoofs on the sodden forest duff, the rustle of branches disturbed by his passage. Somewhere, not too far off, a mountain lion coughed, making a sound like a woman wailing her grief. Near by a small night animal scampered through brush, sending the horse shying sideways again.

The rain had not stopped but with no wind to drive it, it only dripped sullenly through the canopy of interlaced tree branches above. And then the wind began again. It struck his face, half blinding him. When he lifted his head he felt the first snowflake. The wind had changed, coming now from a northerly direction, freezing the rain into snow and stinging ice.

Within five minutes he was plastered with wet, wind-driven snow. The horse fought at him. He held the reins in an iron grip, using his heels on the animal's flanks to force it forward.

As he went northward, the trees began to thin and the snow was blinding in its thickness. Once he stopped and called out, trying to lift his voice above the storm.

"Leslie!"

Only the wind keened at him for an answer.

He crossed a clearing and although the darkness was too thick to make out more than bare outlines of large objects, he knew that the snow was piled deep in the open by the way the horse struggled to gain headway.

He thought, "Maybe she had sense enough to drop to lower country." But he knew there was little chance. In her determination, she would go for the goal she had set herself—the Border. And the closest route to the Border was a direct line north.

The cold was getting deeper and deeper inside him. The wet, clinging snow was melted by the heat of his body to water that seeped through his clothing, soaking him to the skin, ran into his boots and worked from the brim of his hat down his neck. And, although the snow seemed to be lessening and the wind had died, the air lay like a damp, icy blanket about everything, driving

the cold moisture into him, making him ache to the bone.

When he came to a thick clump of trees, he stopped. He had two choices, he knew—to go on and take the chance that he would find her before he froze or to wait until daylight when he might have some chance of tracking her. He hated to think of her alone, perhaps half frozen, wandering blindly in the darkness. On the other hand, with the head start she had gotten, she might well have had sense enough to do as he was going to do now and make a temporary camp.

It was the horse that decided him. When they reached the thick grove of trees, it stopped and stood spraddle-legged, head down. Dunn tried to lift its head, to spur it into motion, and it stumbled forward once and then stood again. Quietly, then, Dunn left the saddle. A little searching revealed a comparatively bare spot in the lee of a thick-boled cedar and here he made his camp.

He built his fire as big as possible with what dead-wood he could find close at hand. He unsaddled the horse and rubbed it down, using the dry inner surface of his blanket. His coffee pot steaming, he stripped and hung his clothing over sticks. The blanket smelled wetly of horse but he rubbed himself until the friction and the heat of the fire made his skin glow and warmth seeped back into him.

He sat down, the blanket about him, his back to the tree, and ate his cold beans and bannock, washing it down with the scalding, strong coffee. His ration was nearly gone and he carefully preserved the grounds and made a second pot. When his clothing was nearly dry, he put it back on and then sat down again, drinking the weak brew he had boiled, and smoking until his mouth was raw.

Day came gray and ugly, the sky overhead low and solid, the snow a steady white sifting down. The light wind was still with him and he rode into it, using it for direction again, unable to see more than a dozen feet

ahead through the heavy snow. Once he thought he heard water running to his left, and he rode that way. He could not think of any water that might be in this direction but he was all too aware of the inadequacy of his map, and so he pushed on through snowbent brush, trying to see through the curtain of white that fell persistently around him.

He came to a small clearing and lowered his head as the wind struck against his face. The horse stopped again and he was about to draw on the reins when he saw the tracks. They were nearly drifted full but unmistakably prints made by a horse.

He turned in the direction they took and followed, heeling his horse unmercifully.

"Lesliel"

The wind snatched at his voice, throwing it into the air to be swallowed by the snow.

"Leslie!"

The answer came from close by, sharp and clear through the hissing of the falling snow. It was a single shot from a carbine.

When Dunn rode off to check the pass to see if Tyne and his men had come over it, Leslie knew what she must do. Her mind was still occupied with but one thought: to stay free from Tyne and the army as well. It was not that she distrusted Dunn; she had found him honest and more than likable as an individual. But she had worked at the Fort long enough to know the impersonality of the army mind. And it was this that she feared. And although she knew Dunn would do as much as he could for her, she doubted if it would be enough.

She gave him about ten minutes and then made her preparations. She divided the food scrupulously into two parts, wrapped hers in one blanket, made sure that she had the carbine loaded and extra shells for it. She saddled her horse, tied the blanket load behind the saddle, and only then did she hesitate. The cloudiness of the

rapidly darkening sky and the soft soughing wind disturbed her. But, she thought, if she did not go now she might not get another chance.

She lifted herself into the saddle, crossed the creek and turned northward.

She rode hard while the daylight lasted. When the heavy darkness closed in, she slowed down. The rain began and the wind started to drive down through the trees. She kept herself oriented as Dunn had by keeping her back to the storm.

For a time as she rode, she regretted having done this to Dunn, realizing that he had risked himself more than once for Will as well as for her.

Her thoughts kept drifting back to him, picking out small details of the way he acted, the way he had looked at various times.

Essentially she was an honest person, particularly with herself. She wondered if part of her suspicion of Dunn—part of the wall she had deliberately kept between them—was fear of him as a man. In all her life she could not remember having been able to say to herself: "That man I could share my life and myself with." Until she met Dunn.

She recalled now the night in the moonlight when she had deliberately sought him out. It had been only to discover where his suspicions lay, she had told herself then, but now she admitted there had been more. She had wanted to be alone with him, to hear his voice, to feel the touch of his strong fingers on her arm. And then there was the companionship they had shared by the fire after crossing the ledge—was it less than twenty-four hours ago? And she knew that her own attitude, her distrust, had made her withdrawal from him almost instinctive and had been the thing that had again raised the barrier between them.

When the wind died and then shifted, bringing the snow harshly against her face, her will rose, forcing her to hold the horse's head into the storm, to keep kicking with her heels, forcing the animal forward. More than

once she thought it would flounder. Finally she made herself slow down and seek some sort of shelter.

When the trees grew thick again, she found a spot comparatively free of wind and built a fire. She sat before it, warming herself, thinking hopefully. "He won't have come in this storm. He's still safe under the overhang." And in her rose a great loneliness that finally dissolved into sleep.

With daylight, she ate a few mouthfuls of cold food and rode on. Soon she was plastered with the snow, feeling it work through her garments, soaking and chilling her. The horse began to fight more and more until her arms were weary of holding its head into the storm. Once he bolted, seeking to put his rump to the wind. When she had him again under control, she saw that she was on the edge of a clearing. And through the sifting snow, she could hear the sound of water running. Puzzled now, unsure of her direction, she went across the clearing toward the sound of water, hoping that she might follow it in the direction of the Border. All water would go that way, she told herself, since that was the direction of the slope of the land.

The cold was working deeply into her, driven by the wind coming sharply across the clearing. But she kept going, her head down, doggedly fighting the wind.

The drifts were thick in the open and more than once the horse lost its footing and nearly pitched her free from the saddle as the wind lifted in force, swirling snow down from the sky and up from the drifts to strike against her face. Finally the horse threw its head up savagely, tearing the reins from her numbed fingers, leaving her helplessly clinging to its back.

As the wind lashed the side of its face, the animal turned and raced away from the storm. Her hands on the horn, she leaned forward, judging her chance of catching the reins, knowing what might happen if she were thrown and left afoot in this wilderness and weather. The reins were beyond her reach, she realized, and so she drew the carbine from its boot and reached

back to unlash the provision-filled blanket. The horse was zigzagging as if it had gone crazy and she knew that her numbed grip on the horn could not last much longer.

She got the blanket into her lap and turned. The horse stopped suddenly, rearing up, screaming in terror, its front hoofs pawing at the air. In that instant she saw the mountain lion.

It lay on a barren branch readying itself, half concealed by the snow. Then the glimpse was gone as the horse's front hoofs plunged down, jarring through the snow. She felt herself lifted from the saddle, had a glimpse of the mountain lion springing, leaving the branch.

She rolled as she hit. She felt the blanket leave her lap where she had been clutching it, but the carbine stayed in her right hand. The lion had sprung for the horse, missed as the animal fled, and now it was turning, seeking her.

Through the hissing of the snow, a voice rang in her ears, calling her name. She shook her head to clear it of the sound and tried to line her sights on the cougar. It was tensed now, its tail lashing softly. She saw it leap as she fired. She tried to run, to throw herself to one side. The deep snow caught her and she fell. She felt the weight of the mountain lion as the smothering snow closed about her.

EIGHTEEN

DUNN might have missed her had he not found her horse. It came out of the snow, looming up suddenly, running directly at him. Leaning out of the saddle, Dunn caught the bridle and swung the horse around, snubbing it up close to his own.

"Easy there," he murmured. "Easy, fellow."

The horse stood, trembling. Dunn tied the reins to his saddle and then set out in the direction from which the horse had come. He found her just short of the timber.

She lay half buried in the snow, the mountain lion sprawled dead not a foot from her. He dropped to his knees by her side. She still held the carbine gripped strongly in one cold hand; the other was flung up to her face as if to ward off a blow. The blanket lay near with one corner showing above the snow. Dunn put his hand to her chest but he could feel no heartbeat.

Swearing softly, he thrust his hand inside her blouse, inside the heavy, wet shirt and underwear. He could feel the slow ragged pulse of her heartbeat now. Relief swept him.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted her out of the snow, brushing it as well as he could from her clothing. It was then he saw the slash of the cougar's claw. It had gone through her trousers, ripping them almost along the inner seam. He spread the slash apart and saw the faint line of congealed blood. It was not deep. With luck he could get her to warmth and bandage the wound against the time when it would start bleeding.

He worked swiftly, transferring their provisions to one blanket and wrapping her in the other. He had to rope her firmly into the saddle of her horse.

If he could find the camp they had left, that would be best. He needed hot water, warmth, a good fire and shelter from the still falling snow. He forced himself to

go slowly, seeking some sign of the trails he must have followed during the night.

He stopped suddenly, brought up abruptly by the sound of water coursing more strongly and by the dropping off of the land. Puzzled, he circled about until he was sure. This water he had been following was the creek that ran by the overhang. Both he and Leslie, relying on a swiftly shifting wind for direction, had spent the night and morning circling about within a short distance of their starting point.

The irony of it struck him, but he wasted no time brooding over it. He turned the horses and backtracked, keeping the creek on his left now.

He saw the overhang through the snow that was like thin mist and smelled the faint odor of smoldering embers almost at the same time. He left the horses while he carried her inside. Then he built the fire up again, piling on the dry wood, until flames roared and crackled, leaping almost to the low roof of the small shelter. When it was going briskly, he laid on some of the birch, split open so that it would catch and burn faster.

He emptied their provisions in a heap and staked the blanket that had contained them up to dry. He put water on to boil and then he half ran to the horses and led them to the small clearing. The mule stood just in the shelter of the trees, its back to the wind. The horses unsaddled and hobbled, Dunn left them and stumbled back through the snow to the overhang.

Leslie Burke lay as he had left her, not moving. It was only when he knelt beside her to unwrap the blanket that he realized how much saving her meant to him. He stared down, trying to comprehend the surge of feeling, the realization. And then, hesitantly, he bent his head, touching his lips to hers. They were cold but as they parted slightly under his he could feel the faint, fluttering warmth of her breath.

He unrolled her from the blanket. Her clothing was sodden, her flesh damp and chill to his touch. With the

same steady motions, he stripped off her clothing, tossing it into a pile on top of the blanket. The crackling fire had heated the space until it was almost too hot, sending warmth from the low roof and the walls downward onto them.

He got the dry blanket, laid her on it and then began to rub her. His hands moved gently, stroking her feet and hands, working up her long, slender legs. The slash of the cougar's claw was not a bad one, he saw. After he had washed off the blood, he discovered it to be no more than a scratch six inches long, barely deep enough to have broken the skin.

He could feel warmth coming to her flesh and he began to rub more vigorously. He moved her closer to the fire but away from the corner of the overhang where the smoke was gathering and continued his rubbing. His face was flushed with heat and, as she began to stir slightly, with embarrassment at the thought that she might awaken and find herself thus before him.

More quickly now she began to respond to his strong rubbing. Her skin turned pinkish and warm and he could feel the aliveness of her muscles beneath the firm flesh. Dunn became suddenly too aware of her long, finely molded thighs, the flatness of her stomach, the high, hard roundness of her breasts, and in an agony of self-consciousness, he turned his head away and sought to rub without looking at her.

She said, "Really, Captain, I'm not that horrible to look at!"

He felt the heat of blood rush to his face and he jerked his hands away as if they had been burned. When he looked at her, she was smiling; there was color in her cheeks, and her eyes were bright and alive.

"How long have you been awake, damn it?"

"Just now," she assured him. "It was like swimming up out of a dream—the warmth and—and everything." She thought, I've left part of myself there too—in the dream. She felt different somehow, no longer afraid of

him or of her own emotions. It seemed now as if she had left her whole past back there where she had fainted in the snow.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you," she said, "but you nearly put your finger in my eye."

He turned his head away. "Let me wrap the blanket about you. Your clothes will be dry soon."

She said softly, reaching her arms up, "Hang my clothes, Captain—and the blanket."

He lay lazily in a cocoon of blanket, feeling the fire bounce off the overhang and flood its warmth down. He reached out now and then to knock the ash from his cigarette or to lift the cup of hot coffee Leslie had placed within his reach. She was gone but this time he was not worried.

Outside it had stopped snowing. The clouds had blown away and the cold, clear light of evening shone in the bit of sky that he could see from where he lay. He was setting the coffee cup down when he heard the shot, a flat, hard sound that brought him to his feet, the blanket falling away from him. He shivered as the air, warm as it was from the fire, struck his body.

"It's all right." It was her voice.

He dropped back, wrapping the blanket about himself again. In a moment she came into sight, a small deer draped over one shoulder, the carbine in her other hand. She bent, letting the deer slide to the sand and straightened, smiling at him.

"I saw this when I was checking the horses. Maybe the army can live on beans and side meat forever. I can't."

His eyes took in the remembered shape of her body, distorted though it was by bulky clothing made bulkier by the bandage on her thigh. Every movement she made was a memory to him, fresh and warming.

He said, "I love you," in a voice that surprised him.

She stepped to him and dropped to her knees, staring

down into his face. Her eyes were tender and when she kissed him, her mouth was gentle. His hands lifted up and caught her hair and his fingers tangled themselves in it, holding her face against his. She was all strength and warmth and then fire. He heard himself say, "Leslie," but it was only his mind caressing her name.

After supper, Dunn said in the same bantering tone she had been using toward him, "This time you won't run away? Or do I have to tie you?"

She was serious, watching the play of firelight on the rugged, freshly shaven planes of his face. "I don't know, Nat. That's up to you. I'll do whatever you think best."

He said with equal quietness, "The army can hardly accuse my wife of complicity in murder and theft."

"If I return as your wife—or wife-to-be," she mur-mured, "they can hardly think anything else. Your story of Will's dying statement will carry that much less weight. They might even include you in it, saying that you tried to help me escape."

It was a jarring thought. Dunn was silent. He said finally, "It isn't the army that's our first concern. It's Tyne. He wants us both—you alive, me dead. And Fife is with Tyne."

"Perhaps you were right," she said. "If you bring me in and then get Tyne—alive—and testify in my favor. . . ." She broke off, staring into the fire. Lifting her head, she looked into his eyes. "How much chance do I have of being cleared now, Nat?"

He said honestly, "Fifty-fifty—with luck."

"And you'll wait for me?" She tried to make her voice light. "How much of a sentence will I get? What do they do to women?"

He did not know; he had known of no woman charged by the army. But then she would undoubtedly be tried in a civil court. The army would certainly turn her over to a U. S. Marshal. He said harshly, "No, damn it! I won't take the chance, Leslie."

He got up, walking away from her. Inside he felt the whole solid structure of his beliefs, of his devotion to his career, erupt in one sickening burst.

"Unless I get the evidence—on Tyne, on Fife—they won't believe the truth. It's the system, Leslie. As men, they'd accept the truth; as parts of the system, they'd not dare." His eyes were bleak, staring at her. "We'll cross the Border and wait for Tyne. Once across, the cavalry can't touch us. We'll wait for Tyne and then we'll go."

She knew how much making such a decision had cost him. But for the moment there was no remedy. Her own freedom was precious to her, but Nat Dunn was even more so.

She said, "We cross the Border and wait for Tyne—if he doesn't get here before that."

"He was in no better shape to travel than we," Dunn said. "Until the snow goes—as long as it lies this deep, we have nothing to fear." He went to her and put out a hand, touching her hair. "For now," he said, "we can rest easy."

She came into his waiting arms.

NINETEEN

DUNN awoke near the end of the night to a feeling of oppressiveness. Beside him, Leslie lay huddled close for warmth. He was sweating. The air coming in under the overhang was warm, almost springlike. It felt cool against his face until he noticed its moistness.

Carefully he wriggled out of the blankets and drew on his trousers and shoes and walked to the edge of the overhang.

Thick clouds were scudding across the sky, driven by a westerly wind, blotting out the fading stars. There no longer was any snow between the overhang and the creek bank. The creek itself was singing with a fresh burden of water, rushing now where it had flowed placidly before.

He said savagely aloud, "Chinook!"

The first faint streaks of daylight were coming as he went back to the shelter. He stirred the fire and put coffee on to boil. He checked the food and decided that they had enough with the remains of the deer for three more meals at most. Now he thought, they might not need that much, not with this Chinook wind cutting away the snow like a heated knife.

He called Leslie to breakfast when it was ready and by the time she returned from washing in the creek, the first rain was falling in thick, warm drops.

She had not spoken since he had waked her, but now she said, "I felt you leave me, Nat. I'm afraid now when you leave me. I've never been afraid to be alone before. But now I am."

He reached out to stroke her hair tenderly. "I know," he said. "But don't think of it. It will never happen."

There was a great deal more that she wanted to say, wanted to hear him say, but something in his expression

stopped her. "There isn't much snow left," she said. "Not much at all."

The rain slashed down viciously and then with the same suddenness that the last storm had stopped, it ceased falling. The wind rose higher. The clouds broke apart. When the sun rose, it came up in a clear, washed-blue sky.

The air was fresh and cool now with a hint of fall. It was a day to enjoy, but Dunn knew that there could be no enjoyment for them. With the snow gone, it was the day Tyne could come.

He left his sidearm with Leslie, took the carbine.

"Keep the mule and your horse ready. If you hear shooting, ride," he said when he was ready to leave.

"And go away from you, Nat?"

He kissed her gently. "I'll catch up with you." He tried to find a smile for her. "I always have."

"We aren't even sure Tyne found the way here," she said in an effort at lightness.

"No—we aren't sure."

She went into the shallow cave and began to pack.

Dunn rode easily through the freshness of the day. He was trying to visualize Tyne's actions and could see only one answer. Especially, he thought, with a man like Fife along. Sooner or later, he would know they had not gone down the western slope of the mountain and would turn back. Once that happened, the trail they had taken through the cut would be the obvious one. Where they were now depended on where they had been when the storm struck.

He climbed the low ridge that gave him a view of the bare stretch just below the top of the saddle. He had hardly slackened the reins when he saw the lone, blue-clad figure taking shape. It was Fife. He was alone, and this puzzled Dunn.

While he watched, he saw the three figures in outline at the top of the saddle. They came in file, moving faster than Fife had. Dunn felt a sharp sickness inside himself. Fife was no more than an hour away now, Tyne not

twice that. He turned and rode for the trail and Leslie.

She was ready when he arrived, the mule loaded and her horse standing by saddled. She saw the news in his face and mounted her horse before he came abreast of her. He took the lead rope of the mule and tied it to his saddle and they rode on, following the trail they had taken the night of the storm.

"It's Tyne?"

"Fife is ahead," he told her. "And Tyne is about a half hour behind him."

"And now?"

"The Border. We can stop them there."

"And then run the rest of our lives," she murmured. But she did not say it loud enough for him to hear.

Fife picked up Dunn's trail at the valley floor. He stopped once and saw Tyne not far behind him. Tyne must have been closer behind than he had thought.

He was hungry, but he knew they must be hungrier. Fife cut his pack animal loose; what little food he had left he transferred to the blankets rolled behind his saddle.

When he broke out of the deep timber into thinner trees, he could see the swell of Boundary Peak almost straight ahead and he knew where they were heading.

It was what Fife would do. Run to safety from the army and then turn and wait for Tyne. Once Tyne was gone, then there would be Leslie and the mine for just the two of them. It was what he would do and slowly he pushed aside all other considerations—he could not really see Dunn doing anything else or having any other motivation.

Deep in thought, he came to a boggy place and nearly mired his horse before he could back it out. He had to work in the direction he had come until he found the trail again, and then he lost precious minutes when it disappeared over a stretch of rocky ground. By the time he was straightened out and on the valley floor again, he could hear Tyne in the near distance. Tyne was

going in a straight line, he realized, letting the peak guide him.

Fife tried to hurry his horse but the timber thickened again and he had to twist and turn to fight his way through the heavy brush. He began to climb and he realized that he was on the skirt of the peak now, and finally he broke out onto a barren bench with the main body of the peak directly west of him and the undulating timberland of Canada sloping away northeast toward the gleaming, twisted line that was the Kootenai River.

He reined in and he could see Dunn and Leslie going down the slope northward. They were moving slowly, not a hundred yards ahead.

He heard Tyne and his men crashing through the last of the brush and then they topped the rise and drew up beside him. Tyne had a gun in his hand and it was aimed at Fife's belly.

"You figure on cutting somebody out of his share?" he asked quietly.

"Don't be a fool," Fife told him. "With that cavalry so close behind us, I wanted to make sure we got Dunn."

"Behind, hell," Tyne said savagely. "They're on our tail from two sides." He jerked his head eastward and Fife could see them, a line coming up from the Kootenai. And he could hear the squad that had been behind them all the way, working their way up the slope to where he and Tyne waited.

Dunn had stopped and was looking back at them and then away, toward the cavalry coming from the east. Tyne cursed angrily and thrust his gun into its holster, reaching for his carbine.

"Don't be a damned fool!" Fife cried. "If you hit the girl . . ." His mind was seeking a way to get Leslie Burke without the oncoming soldiers realizing his actual part in it.

"I never miss," Tyne said, and shot.

Down the slope, Dunn seemed to lift in the saddle, turn, and then slide awkwardly to the ground. Fife said

thickly, "Ride out of here, Tyne. Let me handle this. I'll get the girl in jail and then you can come for her."

Tyne's eyes were bleak. "Like you waited for us back there?"

A shot whined up at them. Leslie Burke stood over Dunn, her carbine steady. Tyne reined aside, started back down the slope, pulled around as the crash of the oncoming soldiers could be heard. "Whole damned army for witnesses," he said. "To hell with it. I'm going to get that girl and ride."

Fife reined his horse toward Tyne, jarring his mount, sending Tyne off balance. His gun came out, centered on Ritter and Hilton as they began to move. "Do it my way," he said angrily.

He turned and rode. A bullet whined by Fife and he held up both hands briefly as he approached Leslie Burke.

She was standing over Dunn, her eyes bleak, her mouth a cold hard line. "Well, Lieutenant?"

"Get out of here," Fife cried at her. "Tyne is coming. Get Dunn and ride."

She did not lower the carbine. "Ride where?"

Beneath her, Dunn stirred. Fife said, "Into those rocks —any place you can hold Tyne off for awhile."

He left the saddle, ignoring her gun and holstering his own. He looked back and saw Tyne coming now. Fife hoisted Dunn into the saddle, feeling the stickiness of blood where his hand rested. Leslie mounted and, with Fife leading Dunn's horse and the mule, followed him up the slope of Boundary Peak and into a jumble of rock.

Dunn spoke. "Help me down." His voice was strained and thin. He heard Leslie stir beside him and he added softly, "Just the shoulder. It's all right."

She could see Tyne now and she steadied the carbine on a rock and fired, clipping his hat from his head, making him swing away.

Dunn had only his sidearm and he knelt beside Leslie

and Fife, waiting for the time to use it. "What's your stake in this, Fife?" he asked.

Fife was ready. "The same as yours, Captain. I met this Tyne by Burke's body back in the hills. I was foolish enough to enlist his aid. Then I found out where he stood and I ran for it. He caught up with me."

Leslie Burke said in a puzzled voice, "He tried to knock Tyne's arm when he shot at you."

Dunn said, "We have no authority on this side of the line, Lieutenant."

"Only the authority of self-defense," Fife said. He fired again as Leslie Burke began to shoot. Hilton was riding off. Ritter was trying to come in from the side. Dunn turned and drove two shots at him. Ritter's horse went down and the man rolled clear. Ritter began to run, stumbled and fell. Tyne rode in to pick him up. He was an easy target, but no one shot at him until he had Ritter in the saddle with him. He stopped then and took Ritter's hat and put it on, then doffed it mockingly in their direction. Then he reined about and rode away, joining Hilton and disappearing over the curve of the ground.

Fife looked at Leslie Burke. "You're beyond reach of the army, Miss Burke. What do you intend to do?"

She did not answer. Dunn rose with obvious pain to his feet and tried to get to his horse. "We'll ride, Leslie. As I said."

She saw him stumble and stepped forward. Fife was there too and they caught him as he fell. Fife eased him to the ground. Leslie took her carbine and handed it to him.

"We'll ride," she said. "Back across the Border—to the army."

Fife bent to lift Dunn, hiding his tight smile. He had won.

TWENTY

DUNN was seated in Colonel Sanders' office. Lieutenant Fife stood rigidly at attention, his gaze fixed above and slightly to the right of the colonel's head.

Sanders said, "As I understand your testimony, Lieutenant, this man Tyne said that he saw Captain Dunn and the girl with Burke and that he came to investigate and was held at gunpoint by them both."

"Yes, sir."

Dunn's expression was completely blank. Sanders went on, "And then when Captain Dunn realized the cavalry was coming, he and Miss Burke abandoned her brother and rode off."

"Yes, sir. According to Tyne, there was a brief gun battle, but the captain and Miss Burke escaped. Tyne and his men were riding after them when I came up."

"And you chose to join forces with this man Tyne?"

"In a sense, sir." Fife spoke slowly as if he were choosing his words carefully. "Tyne claimed that they had taken some of his possessions—his provisions, among other things—and also he said that he knew the mountains. Since I did not, I accepted him as a guide."

"To trail a fellow cavalry officer?"

"To trail Miss Burke, sir. I was not aware of the captain's motives, nor did they concern me." Here he hesitated and then said, "And, sir, this man Tyne might well have planned to attack the captain. It was my duty to protect him—as a fellow officer."

Dunn wanted to say, "Bravo!" It was cleverly handled. There was no flicker of expression on Sanders' schooled features. He said, "Commendable, Lieutenant. And when did you part company with Tyne?"

"When I realized by the conversations I heard that he was the man we had been searching for. He was the one to whom Burke had been relaying the information."

"And so you aided Captain Dunn in driving Tyne off."

"Yes, sir."

"And then Miss Burke surrendered herself voluntarily to you?"

"Yes, sir. Since I had no jurisdiction across the Border, she came willingly with me to this side. The men under Lieutenant Schmidt and another group under Sergeant Jonas arrived. Tyne had crossed the Border, so we returned here at once."

Sanders shifted his gaze to where Dunn sat without his blouse, a bulky bandage under his shirt where it covered his right shoulder.

"Captain, may I ask why you took Miss Burke across the Border?"

Dunn's voice was as formal as Fife's had been. "We were seeking protection from Tyne, sir. I was not concerned with borders, but a place where we could find shelter."

"Then you were not aware that you had gone into Canada?"

"Afterwards, yes, sir."

"I can hardly censure you for not returning Miss Burke, Captain, since you were certainly in no condition to do so."

"May I suggest," Dunn said blandly, "that a commendation might be in order for Lieutenant Fife. He and Miss Burke kept Tyne and his men away."

"Of course," Sanders said. "If I follow the sequence of the action correctly, he acted bravely."

Fife said, "I merely followed my duty, sir." His eyes flicked in surprise toward where Dunn sat.

"We have the problem of Miss Burke," Sanders murmured. His eyes studied Fife. "I understand, Lieutenant, that you and she had—an understanding.'"

"Yes, sir."

"And yet, as she was across the Border, she was not required to return nor were you required to return her."

"At the risk of sounding smug, sir, I placed my duty above other concerns."

"Commendable," Sanders murmured. He nodded. "That will be all for now, Lieutenant."

Fife saluted, turned about smartly and marched from the room. When the door had closed behind him, Sanders said, "Bring your chair closer, Nat."

Silently, Dunn moved his chair against the desk. He used his right arm with the same ease as his left. When he was seated, he took the cigar proffered him and accepted the match the colonel held. He leaned back, puffing.

"If what you say is true, Fife has a lot of nerve."

"He must know that Burke told me about him. Tyne would have warned him."

"I had men checking his work carefully last week when he was detailed to hunt for Tyne," Sanders said.

They were at Fort Kootenai, Sanders having come up at the request of Major Cartwright. Cartwright had been shocked at the dereliction of Burke and his sister. Dunn had told Cartwright nothing of Fife's actions except that Fife had aided him against Tyne.

However, to Sanders he had told the story exactly as it had happened, stressing his belief in Leslie Burke's innocence and not minimizing his own efforts in her behalf.

Sanders had said, "You could face court-martial, Nat. And she will face a U. S. Court if we prefer charges."

"She knows that."

"She won't say anything," Sanders told him. "She thanked me for paroling her to Cartwright, which I did because the jail is hardly fit for a woman. But she offers no defense except that she had always helped her brother."

"She tried to stop him," Dunn said. "If she were in with them, Tyne wouldn't have needed to chase her in that fashion. Nor would she have had to run. Nor," he added dryly, "would I be here talking to you. She could have rid herself of me numerous times."

"And once almost did," Sanders commented in his dry way.

He watched Dunn smoke the cigar calmly. If Dunn's case went to court-martial, Sanders knew the army mind well enough to be sure that Dunn would, at the very least, be disgraced.

He said now, reluctantly, "Nat, I'm inclined to believe you because I know you. I'm inclined not to believe Fife because I don't know him. And yet there is no evidence against him."

"In the week he had before you came, sir, he had opportunity to destroy anything that would show against him."

"That still doesn't explain why he brought the girl in."

"I can't explain it," Dunn said. He rapped ash off the cigar and leaned forward. "You've cooperated with me so far—up to and including letting me go on pretending helplessness because of this wound. I ask a little more cooperation."

Sanders nodded, a barely perceptible motion of his head.

Dunn said quickly, "Tyne will still be close, I think. I have a kind of general idea of where his place is from what Burke said. I haven't told Fife that; I didn't want him warning Tyne."

Sanders looked puzzled. "You mean you want to bring Tyne in. What will that prove?"

"Nothing," Dunn said. He grinned at Sanders. "I want you to parole me to Fife until my status is clear. Then I want you to detail Fife to go after Tyne, taking me along."

"You're taking quite a risk, Nat. If what you say is true . . ."

"It will give us a chance to prove Fife's affiliation. If he is what he claims, then he'll help me get Tyne. If not, we both know he can't afford to have Tyne brought in. He'll have to try to get rid of me."

"And if he does, he can claim Tyne did it and then escaped," Sanders said.

"He can," Dunn agreed. "But Tyne won't go anywhere, not without Leslie. You'll have another crack at him."

Sanders blew a smoke ring and punched his finger through the hole, smiling slightly at his success.

Dunn sat motionless.

Sanders said, "I'll do what you suggest, subject to two conditions, Nat."

"Any conditions," Dunn said. He was grinning.

"That you let the cavalry back you up. We'll keep out of the way but we want to be within hailing distance."

"The other condition?"

"That I have some better grounds for suspecting Fife. As it stands, I'm prejudiced against him without real cause. I'd feel more justified if I could have something concrete."

"I think I can offer something," Dunn said. "And I'll wager—if I have anything left to wager—that if you parole me to Fife and tell him we're going after Tyne—make it in three days so my shoulder will 'heal' a little more—that there will be an attempt by Tyne to get Leslie Burke away from here."

"That can be prevented easily enough," Sanders said. "Meanwhile, Nat, try and think of something else to offer me—just in case Tyne doesn't do what you think he's going to."

Dunn stood up and pulled his chair back. He was sitting in his former position when Fife, ordered in, entered. Once more Fife stood at attention before the desk.

Sanders said, "At ease, Lieutenant." He sounded slightly distressed. "There is some doubt about Captain Dunn's actions, Lieutenant. From the testimony I have heard, I feel that only the presence of Tyne and his men can settle that."

Fife's eyebrows went up. "Even so, sir, would we be able to believe such a man? According to the captain, Tyne caused a great deal of trouble in the Clearwater country. He's apparently an intelligent man—hardly one we could fool easily."

"Perhaps not," Sanders said. "But this man Hilton—

whom I know, by the way—could be broken down. Once he was, Tyne would have little defense. Anyway, Lieutenant, I'm working on that premise. And because I dislike seeing a fellow officer with an excellent record not given every possible chance, I'm going to make this proposal."

Dunn could almost hear Fife's breath choke up while he waited. Sanders said, "I'm paroling the captain to you, Lieutenant. When his wound is somewhat better, I want the two of you to go after Tyne. Captain Dunn feels he knows where he might be. Since both of you are expert trackers, you might find him."

"With a squad, sir?"

Sanders waved a hand. "To warn him? No, alone, if you feel you can do it. The captain suggested three days from now."

Fife did not answer immediately. When he did, he said, "Three days—you heal quickly, Captain."

Dunn grinned easily. "Not heal, Fife, just improve. I'd appreciate your cooperation. As the colonel says, my position isn't too good."

"Anything I can do," Fife said, turning to Sanders. "Sir, I feel I can vouch for the captain."

"I too," Sanders said. His voice was dry again. "But we aren't a court-martial, Lieutenant."

Fife saluted. "Three days then, sir."

Watching him, Dunn knew that he had chosen a formidable opponent—two of them, counting Tyne.

TWENTY-ONE

DUNN and Leslie Burke were not confined to quarters and both ate nightly with Cartwright and Sanders and the other officers of the Fort. In the weeks that had gone by, they had not exchanged a dozen words beyond those polite ones necessary in company. The talk that had started in the garrison died away as Leslie, if anything, showed a definite coolness to both Dunn and Fife.

Dunn felt uneasy. Her attitude was deliberately developed to help their cause, but she was doing such a good job of it that his peace of mind was becoming disturbed. Now his uneasiness grew. He had his small room back, as Leslie had hers, and with the excuse of his wound he managed to sleep enough in the daytime to be able to watch through the night. But as two nights passed and the third and last night before he and Fife were to leave approached, he felt his helplessness and his nervousness increase.

A month had gone by since the night he had ridden out after Leslie Burke and her brother. The moon was bright and nearly full again.

It outlined the compound, casting sharp black shadows from where Dunn sat in the darkness of his small veranda, bundled against the cold, watching.

He expected the attack to be directed against the inside. But he wasn't sure. When the shouting came from outside—the cry of fire—and the first signs of flames from the Trading Post a short run away, he still was not positive.

The Fort was beginning to seeth with noise as the guards sounded the alarm.

Above the other sounds came Cartwright's inquiring voice. It was Fife who called the answer: "Trading Post on fire and spreading."

And spreading. Every man would be turned out, of course, to drive the fire back.

Dunn moved into the ruck of running men, working his way through them to the other side of the compound until he was against the wall of Leslie's room.

He saw Sanders and thought to call a warning to him, when he heard the noise in the darkness behind him. He turned quickly, flinging up his left arm. The blow numbed his wrist. The second blow came at the side of his head, exploding against his temple. He went to his knees, fell to his face and lay still.

Dunn looked at the savage mountains covered with a thin mist of falling rain. The snow line was creeping lower on the slopes almost while he watched. Beside him, Fife rode his sturdy black horse easily, turning to glance at Dunn now and then.

"Sure you're all right, Captain?"

"All right," Dunn said shortly. His head hurt like the devil and in falling he had discovered that his wound wasn't as thoroughly healed as he had hoped. "This is a hell of a thing," he observed quietly.

Fife chose to misunderstand. "You took a bad blow, Captain."

"Dunn will do," he answered briefly. "I didn't mean that, Fife. I was referring to Leslie."

"I'd like to believe that Tyne got her," Fife said. "But isn't it possible that she saw her chance—and ran?"

"That would make her guilty," Dunn pointed out.

"Not necessarily. But if she felt the cards were stacked against her, she might not have wanted to take the chance of a trial."

"Possibly," Dunn said. "But I think Tyne got her. Someone hit me, didn't they? Why else would that happen?"

"I daresay you're probably right, but there are other possibilities."

Dunn grunted. "It's a hell of a thing—when a man is

ordered out to bring proof to save his girl—for someone else."

Fife couldn't be so dense, he thought. But now he said, "For someone else, Dunn?"

"For me," Dunn said. "When this is over, Leslie and I are getting married."

Fife was silent. Dunn said, "I'm sorry. That's the way it is."

"The colonel's orders," Fife murmured. "Still an order is an order. I'm not complaining."

Dunn worked on him a little more carefully. "Of course a lot can happen. Tyne might really get me this time. He'd like to."

"I've thought of that," Fife admitted. "Or get me."

"Or both," Dunn said briefly. "I still wish the colonel had backed us up. But that's his way." He paused and added thoughtfully, "And bringing Tyne in alone will be a feather in our caps, Lieutenant. Besides clearing Leslie, it might mean a promotion for you."

"To hell with the promotion," Fife said.

Dunn did not answer that. He was almost sick with the weariness of this day's ride and as the mountains closed in more tightly about them, he suggested a halt.

"We can't go in until dark anyway," he said. "And if we do go in like spavined horses, Tyne will have the advantage."

Fife found a sheltered spot beneath a large tree at the edge of a creek and began to build a fire. They ate their food cold, washing it down with scalding coffee. The heat of the fire and the beverage put life back into Dunn.

They had started shortly before dawn. When day came they had seen tracks that showed three loaded horses and an unloaded one had come down the trail not too long before but four loaded horses had ridden back. He had forced himself to keep from riding the heart out of his own horse.

But since Dunn had been unconscious a little over an hour and in less than that time after he awakened had

been on the trail, he knew that Tyne's start was not too great.

They had followed the river throughout the day and just at sunset clouds that had scudded over began to drop the thin, fall rain that now held steadily. Just before the rain began, they neared the Border and turned westward, following a creek that ran up through a canyon paralleling the line.

Fife said once, "What makes you think this is the way, Captain?"

"A hunch," Dunn said, "and something Will Burke told me before he died."

He saw Fife stiffen a little at that.

Fife doused the fire when Dunn decided that it was dark enough for them to ride on. They left the canyon and the stream after a time, clinbing a low ridge. Nearing its top, they could smell smoke and Dunn stopped, dropping out of the saddle.

Ten yards to the north, the ridge they were on dropped steeply off into the canyon. It was up that slope that the smoke came.

In the darkness the cabin itself was not visible. But light came through windows, splashing pale yellow into a clearing from three sides. On the near side, a low shed loomed close by the house. Otherwise, Dunn saw no cover from which to approach it.

Dunn said softly, "You go down and I'll guard you from up here. Get behind the corner of that shed and keep an eye peeled for me."

"You can't come down with that arm," Fife said.

"I can try," Dunn told him. "If I can't make it, I'll know soon enough and be able to ride around. In any case, wait for me."

"Yes, sir," Fife said.

Fife took a rope from about his waist and knotted one end to the tree under which they lay. Then, cinching the other end about his waist, he began a slow, backward descent. It seemed no time before a gentle tug came on the rope, indicating that Fife was down.

Dunn drew the rope back up. He could make out the dark blur that was Fife easing around the corner of the low-roofed shed. Dunn went back to the horses, slipped his blanket roll from the saddle, added Fife's and knotted both into his greatcoat. Returning, he fashioned his bundle into a long form, looped the rope about it and began to lower it cautiously.

Dunn knotted the rope with his bundle less than halfway down the cliff and moved away. With the sleeve ends of his coat trailing, it could be taken for a man in the misty drizzle which threatened to turn to snow. He dogtrotted down the slope to the canyon mouth, following the creek into the canyon. When he was within ten feet of the corner of the lean-to, he stopped and lay full length on the ground.

He could see the dummy halfway down the cliff. He nodded in satisfaction and continued to wait.

Soon he saw Fife, a movement at the corner of the shed. He eased out of sight and Dunn crept forward, taking the spot Fife had occupied.

Five minutes dragged by achingly. He cursed Fife for a cautious fool. Surely he would have seen the deception by now and given warning to Tyne.

And then the door opened. Dunn stiffened, readying himself. In the light coming from it, he saw Tyne clearly. He stepped out and Ritter followed.

The gunshot came at that instant. Dunn's eyes caught the flash from the corner of the cabin and the dummy swung with the impact of the bullet. Tyne and Ritter moved now, running through the snow toward where Fife stood with his carbine. Dunn freed his gun and when he heard three shots, he sprinted for the doorway.

Someone fired at him as he rounded the corner and dived into the shack. He saw Hilton standing by a deal table, his face white as if he had just been violently ill. He held no gun. Dunn threw the door shut and dropped the bar across it.

He saw Leslie now and the anger that he had held in check all day burst out, making him tremble with its vio-

lence. She was across the room from him, roped upright on a cot, pressed back into a corner with her legs thrust straight out, her arms tied to the bottom of the bunk ahead. Her face was ashen, her eyes closed. The ropes had been twisted cruelly about her wrists and ankles and he could see shreds of her dress where it had been ripped away from her shoulders.

TWENTY-TWO

HILTON said, his voice slurred, "'Evening, Captain."

Dunn said with soft savagery, "Get over there and cut her loose, Hilton."

"She's a strong woman, Captain." There was no mockery in Hilton's voice. "She never made a sound, never said a word."

"Get over there!"

Hilton stood his ground, still clinging to the table for the support it offered him. "See, Tyne has a paper all ready for her to sign. He rode all the way to Spokane Falls and got a lawyer to draw it up. See, Captain."

Dunn grasped his shoulder and spun him, pushing. "Now! Fast! And then get her and yourself under that bunk."

He could hear some of Tyne's inevitable obscenities.

He heard a sigh and glanced toward the cot to see Leslie slump forward, throwing her unconscious weight on Hilton, driving him awkwardly to the floor. The fall roused Leslie and she lifted her head, her eyes open but unfocused. Dunn said softly, "Leslie."

Her voice was a whimper. "Nat?"

"Get under the bunk," he ordered. "Get Hilton under there too—if you can."

"I'm all right."

Dunn blew out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. A shot drummed into the heavy door.

Tyne was swearing again. Dunn called, "Come and get me, Tyne," and he fired at the west window.

From the other side a gun flamed. He dropped and rolled, firing at the window as he did so. Now the front window ripped and someone fired from there. The shots came from three directions, pinpointed on the spot where his last gun flash had come from.

He rolled under the table this time, jerking it over, making a barricade of it.

"You'll hit Leslie!" he cried warningly.

"To hell with her," Tyne said. "I'll sign her name to that paper myself." His voice came from the front and he fired once, twice, his bullets gouging the table top.

Dunn let all three of them use the table for a target, crawling carefully until he reached the bunk. He lay flat on his belly, his hand searching. He felt the cloth of Leslie Burke's dress.

"Leslie?"

"I'm all right." Her voice sounded stronger. "Hilton has passed out, Nat."

"Crawl out behind the table," he said. "Has he a gun?"

There was a pause. Then she said, "I have it now."

"Get behind the table then," he whispered. "Stay flat."

He drew aside, hugging the floor until she had gone by him. There was a noise from the east window and he twisted, snapping a shot in that direction, hearing a low cry.

He moved, going under the bunk after Hilton. He could feel him lying soggily, his breathing hoarse, the stench of his whiskey-laden breath heavy in the small space. Lifting a hand, Dunn slapped lightly at his face, back and forth until his arm tired and he had to rest.

Hilton began to mutter. From outside, Fife called, "Dunn!"

"Yes, Lieutenant?" His voice was mocking.

"Damn it, Dunn, don't be a fool. You haven't a chance with that arm."

"Go on, Lieutenant."

"If the girl signs, you can both go—north. We'll give you horses and grub."

"I don't want the mine," Leslie whispered fiercely at him. "Say yes, Nat."

"Do you believe them, Leslie?"

From beside him, Hilton said thickly, "He's lying, Dunn. He can't afford to let you go."

"So I know," Dunn said. "Nor let you go. The colonel wants you, Hilton, because you'll talk. Tyne knows that—Fife will have told him. So they can't afford to free you either."

"I'm no fool," Hilton said with dignity. "I know that. There's a gun hanging over my bunk in the corner. Get it for me, Captain."

Fife called, "Well, Dunn?"

"Give us a little time," Dunn said. "What about Hilton?"

"He can go with you."

It was said too fast, too eagerly. Dunn found the bunk and lifted himself onto it and lifted the gun and belt gently down. He eased back as he had come.

Hilton was out from under the bunk and he took the gun eagerly and began to work with Dunn toward the protection of the heavy table.

Dunn said, "All right, Fife, it's your move."

"Toss your guns out and then light the lamp," Fife said.

"Here's my gun!" Hilton shouted. He lifted himself up, sending three quick shots through the west side window before he tumbled back, breathing hard. From the front a gun hammered, sending bullets into the wall and into the table.

Dunn fired at the front window, hearing Tyne swear. Fife fired from the east. There was no sound from the other side and Dunn guessed his earlier shot had hurt Ritter.

There was no shooting now. They lay quietly, Leslie between Dunn and Hilton. He could feel her trembling where her side pressed against him and he ran his hand out, smoothing down her hair.

"How bad was it?" he asked.

"Tyne tied me and told me what he was going to do. That was his way—to tell me in detail what would happen if I didn't sign his paper. The ropes hurt," she added simply. "He started by ripping my dress off my shoulders. He would have done more but you came."

"You're no better off," Dunn said bitterly.

The silence was shattered by a roaring curse from outside. "Stop it, you damned fool . . ."

Dunn swiveled his head toward the east. A pitchpine

torch arced through the broken window and struck the floor a short distance from the door. It lay there, giving off low, eager flames that ate at the dry, splintered wood of the floor.

"That damned Ritter," Tyne said loudly outside, and then there was a single shot.

Leslie gasped. Dunn said softly, "That's the way Tyne is. You can't bargain with him." He lay and smelled the smoke thickening.

A gun eased over the sill of the east window. Dunn fired carefully and the gun lifted in the air and spun out of sight into the darkness.

Dunn called, "The fire's close to the oil, Tyne. The lamp broke and spilled oil all over your floor. When it catches, your precious paper will go too."

Tyne swore at him. There was a shot from the west window now and Dunn guessed that Fife had gone around and taken Ritter's place. The smoke was thickening, making Hilton cough and retch.

"Lie on the floor," Dunn said. "There's fresher air down there." His own eyes were smarting now. And then the edge of the oil caught and the fire leaped up, following the path swiftly, coming directly at the table. Dunn pushed the table away, scraping it over the floor, trying to scrub out the fire that way.

From the side window Fife shot and Dunn felt the heel of his boot jerked off. At his side Leslie fired, driving Fife away from the window. Hilton lay flat and sent his bullets toward the front, letting Dunn have freedom to work.

He lifted himself up and saw the paper. It had fluttered to one side and lay just out of reach of the oil, a long, white, legal-looking document. With an effort, he thrust the table at an angle, reached out an arm and drew the paper to him. He thrust it into his shirt.

"Evidence," he said with heavy humor.

Something drove against the door, shaking the bar. Again. Dunn leaped to his feet, lunging for the smoking torch. He grabbed it and threw it out, hearing it hiss as it

struck in the snow. But the oil-soaked wood had caught and was holding where he had not scraped out the fire with the table, and he turned to stamp at it.

From behind him, he heard the click of Leslie Burke's gun and her warning cry, "Nat!"

He threw himself behind the table as Fife fired. The bullet struck the floor, gouging a long splinter free and into Dunn's leg. He twisted about, his one thought to get Fife. He saw the man's face, saw his gun leveling, and knew he could never shoot in time.

He heard Hilton move, firing as he did, and heard Fife's shot. Hilton gasped as the bullet drove into him. His gun fell from his hand and he slid sideways. He righted himself but did not move again.

Dunn shot now and saw the round hole that appeared between Fife's eyes. Leslie Burke, from beside him, was using Hilton's gun, sending bullets at the front window.

"Goddamn you!" Tyne cried at them. Suddenly a forkful of dry hay cascaded through the east window and showered down on the burning spots in the floor. The hay flared up, smoking, its heat driving against them.

"Get down," Dunn cried to Leslie. "Down and away from it."

Another forkful of hay was thrust through the window. He leaped up, breaking for the door. He felt the surge of pain in his leg now, stumbled, and fell against the door. The smoke from the hay and the oil and his own sweat blinded him.

His hand caught the bar and lifted it, jerking open the door.

"Tyne!"

From behind him a voice said, "Let me," and Hilton pushed past him, his gun in his hand. "I've waited a long time," Hilton said, and went into the open.

Tyne appeared then, his gun ready. He shot.

Hilton fired at the same instant. Dunn saw the impact of the bullet in Hilton's leg, saw it turn him so that he fell face down in the snow. Tyne took two steps and then his

arms went wide and he sprawled forward, his face upward, the snow falling gently down onto it.

Leslie Burke came to stand beside Dunn, coughing, the tears streaming down her smoke-stained cheeks. He put a hand on her. "It'll go up in a minute. Let's get out of here."

He got as far as Hilton and fell. Leslie knelt and looked at him, putting out a hand, touching the splinter. "It's your turn to be a doctor," he said.

He felt the tug, and then the pain. He heard the sound of cavalry bugles but he did not know whether they were real or only in his head. The darkness clamped down about him.

Colonel Sanders looked down at the bed and then at the girl standing on the other side of it. From the pillow Dunn's unshaven features stared upward.

"There'll be no court-martial, nor any trial," Sanders said. He rustled the paper in his hand. "This evidence is conclusive enough for me."

"Fife?" Dunn asked him.

"He died 'in the line of duty,'" Sanders said. "That's the way you wanted it to be?"

"It's better. And Hilton, I suppose, is better off too—dead." Dunn was silent momentarily. "Anything else, Colonel?"

Sanders said, "An order, Captain. You've been in that bed long enough to heal any man. Get up and take a leave—a long leave."

"Yes, sir."

"And—Captain—if I were you, I'd marry that girl before she gets away from you again."

Leslie Burke smiled at him and lowered herself to the bed. She bent down, her face close to Dunn's. "And your orders, Captain?"

Sanders marched from the room. He turned in the doorway and glanced back. "That's an order too," he said. Then he went away. Dunn didn't have a chance of not following it, he told himself.

Action at Boundary Peak

Orders for Captain Nat Dunn, United States Cavalry, were to proceed to Fort Kootenai to stop the looting of gold trains coming down from Canada. At Kootenai, he found the fort badly undermanned. Investigation brought to light that the robbing and murdering was being directed from inside the fort.

Only two people could be suspected—Will Burke, ex-cavalry sergeant, and Will's sister, the dark-haired, gray-eyed Leslie Burke. When Will and Leslie fled the fort, Nat took up their trail. But n love with Leslie—oing to separate him

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